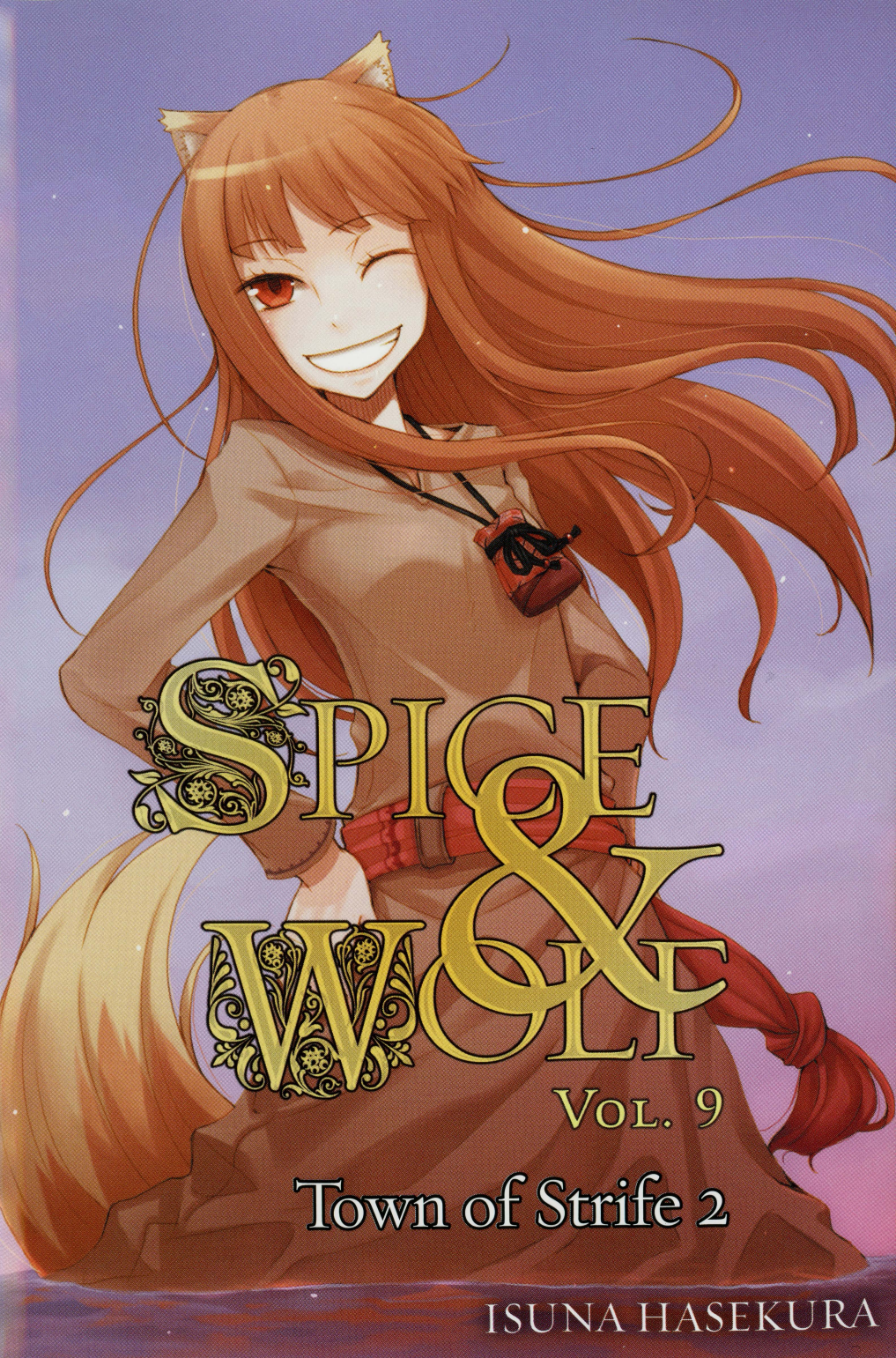

SPICE & WOLF
VOL. 9
Town of Strife 2
ISUNA HASEKURA

SPICE & WOLF

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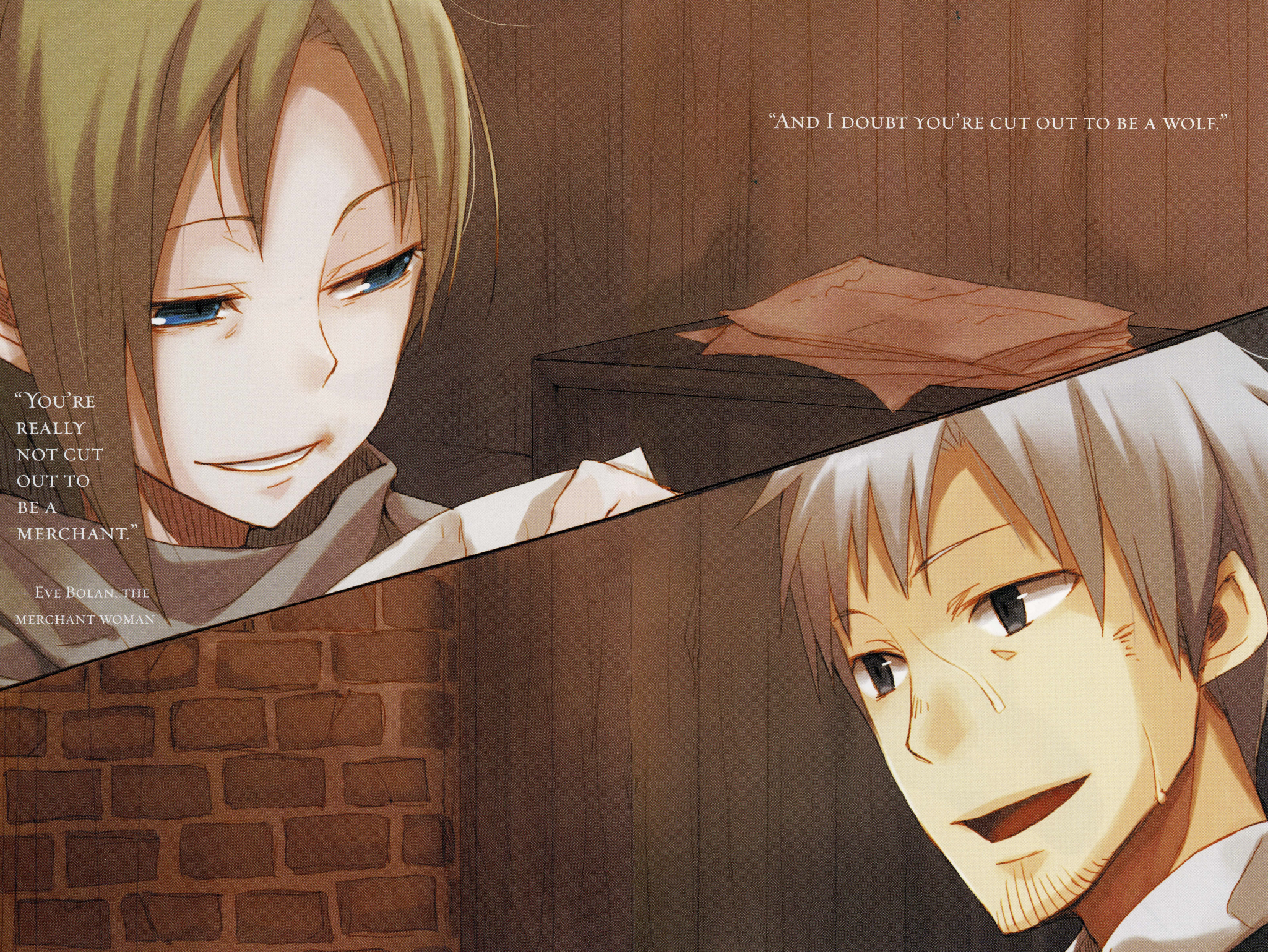
THE TOWN OF STRIFE 2

BY ISUNA HASEKURA
ILLUSTRATED BY JYUU AYAKURA




"Good morning, Mr. Lawrence," came a steady, clear voice that matched its owner's confidence.
"...Good morning to you."
— Tote Col, Apprentice
Dressed impeccably, it was none other than Lud Kieman.
— Lud Kieman, senior member of the Rowen Trade Guild


"Do you truly understand?"
"I believe I do."
"Truly?"


"You're really not cut out to be a merchant."
— Eve Bolan, the merchant woman
"And I doubt you're cut out to be a wolf."

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SPICE & WOLF

Volume IX
The Town of Strife II

Isuna Hasekura

Yen Press
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SPICE AND WOLF, Volume 9: The Town of Strife II
ISUNA HASEKURA

Translation: Paul Starr

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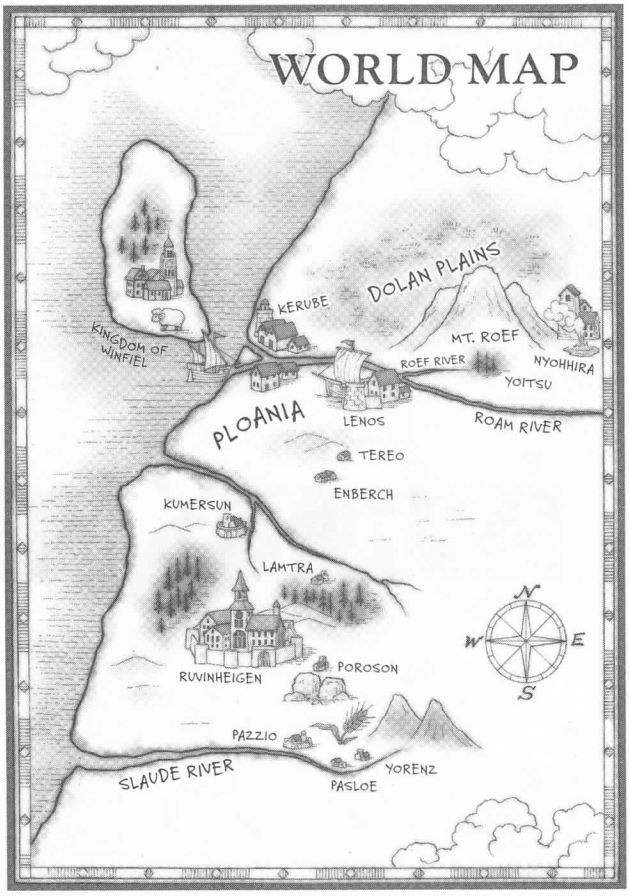
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SPICE & WOLF

THE SETTING
Kerube is a town divided by a river and a delta. The landowners on the north side of the river own the delta, which is an important commerce hub, but it was developed using loans made by wealthy merchants on the south side. Thus the northern landlords have been forced by the southern merchants to continue to pay large amounts of interest on their loan.

THE KEY
The Narwhal is a legendary creature, said to bestow long life and cure disease. It valuable enough to upend the delicate balance of power in Kerube.



Map Illustration: Hidetada Idemitsu

SUMMARY OF TOWN OF STRIFE I

Seeking more information about the wolf bones, Lawrence, Holo, and Col arrive in Kerube. With a letter of introduction from Eve, they visit the Jean Company, which is rumored to be connected with the Debau Company—but Reynolds, the owner of the Jean Company, seems to think the wolf bones are a mere superstition.

Later, in the delta marketplace, Lawrence happens upon Eve and learns of the situation between the north and south sides of Kerube. Eve has been pressed by the northern landlords into solving their territory dispute and has learned that Reynolds's business profits are being stolen by those same landlords. Concluding that Reynolds is himself still searching for the wolf bones, Lawrence goes to see Kieman, the head of the local Rowen Trade Guild branch—but having done so, he becomes torn between trusting the Guild or Eve.

Meanwhile, a legendary sea-beast is brought ashore—a narwhal. Eve contacts Lawrence and tells him of her plan to steal the narwhal away from the northern landlords. As Lawrence agonizes over what to do, he receives a letter from Kieman…

INTERMISSION



The human is a weak creature indeed.

It has neither fangs nor claws nor wings on which to flee.

So to protect themselves, humans must use their minds—technology, strategy, or...

Every creature, human or animal, shares a common method of self-defense.

And that is to form groups.

A single sheep is weak. But a flock of thousands need not flinch at the attack of a few wolves.

By functioning as part of that group, a single animal can find safety, surviving to leave behind descendants.

Humans are the same; they come together to live in groups, and those groups eventually came to be called villages, then cities, as they drove back the darkness of the forest.

But it is also the way of the world that groups formed to protect their members will struggle and fight with other such groups—for a group created for self-defense must necessarily regard outsiders as enemies.

It is like a single great beast, and for a single powerless creature to receive the benefit of that beast's claws and fangs, they must

think of themselves first as part of that creature rather than as a single individual.

When the beast turns right, they must turn right. When it runs left, they must run left. And when it wishes to eat fowl, a fowl they must hunt.

Even if that fowl happens to be their own beloved songbird.

The human is a weak creature indeed.

Here in this world where the gods have long remained hidden in the mists, humans cannot survive on their own.

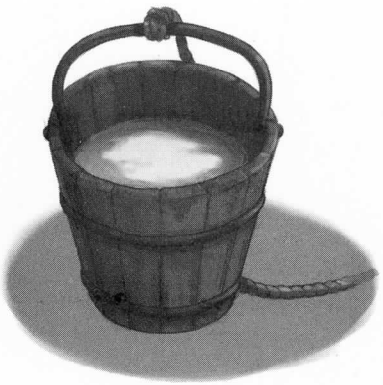
So to protect themselves from the darkness of the forest, they become a single beast surrounded by walls of earth and stone.

Even though they know full well that having borrowed that great beast's power even once, they will never escape its yoke.

Betrayal is never tolerated.

Such is the only way to survive the storms of fate that buffet the world—by the bonds of blood and solidarity.

CHAPTER FOUR



"We must leave this place," Lawrence said bluntly. "And quickly, too."

He entered the room with long strides. On the table were the coins, the puzzle of which Col had solved, and Lawrence gathered them into his coin purse as though he were making a sandpile on a beach.

The travelers' life was one of casting off needless things.

Everything they needed was already packed in a burlap bag in the room's corner, and if flight was necessary, they could simply cinch the bag up, shoulder it, and run—it was far from rare to be attacked during the night, after all.

"Come, you."

Lawrence looked up at the voice.

It was the surprised face of his traveling companion, Holo.

"What's this, then?"

In her hand was a letter written on a single piece of parchment.

Inscribed on it was a statement in curt, undecorated letters, along with a bloodred wax seal in the bottom-right corner.

It was addressed to none other than Lawrence, and the sender

was the Rowen Trade Guild. For a traveling merchant like Lawrence, whose livelihood was ever uncertain, the group of comrade merchants was most encouraging.

Its seal was a powerful shield in any town and could be a powerful weapon as well.

And the guild had sent Lawrence a letter at the inn where he stayed on the north side of Kerube.

"'We seek now a brave merchant who fears neither witch nor alchemist. In consideration of both the wealth and progress of the guild, by all means, please... signed, Lud Kieman.'"

Holo read the letter's contents aloud smoothly and then looked to Lawrence curiously.

Next to Holo, their other travel companion, Col, peered at the document in her hands.

The letter was from Lud Kieman, chief trader of the Kerube branch of the Rowen Trade Guild, and its meaning was clear—there was no doubt that he was trying to get Lawrence's cooperation, just as Eve said he would.

He wanted to deliver the narwhal to Eve and to receive in return the titles for the land on the north side of the river, thereby transforming the balance of power in the town. The narwhal was a creature so valuable that it made such things possible.

But neither Kieman nor Eve could trust the other. Each of them was far too hypocritical to shake hands over a contract. They needed someone to act as a middleman, a go-between. And if possible, someone whom they could each easily control.

In the midst of heated competition over such vast profits, a merchant's life was worth no more than a single grain of wheat.

Lawrence could hear the *crunch, crunch* of creaking bones.

Col and Holo's lack of concern only further aggravated his

nervousness. "Don't you see? This is a summons from my guild," he said by way of explanation, tying the burlap sack tightly closed.

"Your guild?" came Holo's reply, which made Lawrence stand and shake his head.

"The name on the letter, there—that's Lud Kieman, the manager of the local branch of my guild. Even if I don't owe Kieman any favors directly, I owe my allegiance to the Rowen Trade Guild, whose delta house he manages. Do you understand what I'm saying? Kieman is using the reins of my obligation to the guild in order to put me in a terrible position!"

Traders as powerless as traveling merchants can safely move from town to town only because of their guild attachments. Because the guild works tirelessly to acquire various rights and privileges in each town, its merchants could visit those towns and conduct business without worry.

But being able to dine on the fruits plucked by the guild's claws and teeth meant that when a merchant's cooperation was asked, a member could not refuse it.

Because no matter how absurd the request, the many privileges the merchant had so far enjoyed came at the cost of the hard labor of his comrades.

Yet there was a limit to how obligated one could be.

Kieman was scheming in service of his own self-interest and trying to pull Lawrence into those machinations.

He would claim it was in the interests of the guild, and as long as his preparations were thorough, Lawrence would be unable to refuse lest he be branded a traitor by the guild. And there was another reason for Lawrence to be worried—the person with whom he'd only recently conversed in another building.

If Kieman was the head of a great giant composed of an army

of merchants, then his enemy was a wolf of equally impressive stature.

And that wolf had unexpectedly asked Lawrence to betray the guild.

Of course, she was waiting with the promise of dizzying profit, and indeed her proposal to Lawrence was just one part of a larger stratagem she had already set in motion.

It was all but a forgone conclusion that a single traveling merchant would easily be swept away in this crimson maelstrom of money and chance.

Between the gears of power and influence, the blood of a single human was generally of no great value.

"We must leave the city. As soon as possible. Before we no longer can."

There was still time.

Lawrence swallowed those words like a prayer. "Both of you, quickly," he added.

"Would you not calm yourself?" came Holo's cool words, pouring over the scalding fires in his mind.

Those words were like water spilling into boiling oil. Lawrence exploded in spite of himself. "I am quite calm!"

Col stood next to Holo, holding a small wine cask, and he recoiled almost audibly at the sound. Beside him, the white down on Holo's ears stirred the merest fraction.

It was blazingly obvious which of the three was the least composed in the room.

"—..."

Lawrence put down his own load, looked up at the ceiling, then closed his eyes and drew a deep breath.

He remembered that once when he had been on the verge of bankruptcy and ruin, he had slapped Holo's hand away in anger.

He asked himself if he had learned nothing since then.

Inwardly, he cursed himself.

"Well, there's nothing wrong with a pliant male who bends like a green twig, but such a man can hardly be relied upon. A fool is so much the better for his obviousness."

Holo's tail wagged as she stroked Col's head; the boy watched the developments carefully.

"Though possessing two eyes, most creatures can see but a single thing at a time. Do you know why males and females go to such lengths to bond with each other?"

She took the wine cask from Col and pulled its cork free with her teeth. With a light gesture of her chin, she signaled for Col to take the cork from her.

Col did as he was instructed as if well acquainted with the process.

During that time, Holo's eyes remained fixed on Lawrence. "I'm sure your common sense has led you to some sort of clear conclusion."

Lawrence didn't have to ask what Holo would have added to that statement.

The two of them, Holo and Col, sat side by side and regarded him. The pair looked somehow fragile in that moment, which made Lawrence feel like a villain.

"Hmph. From twixt stalks of wheat, I once often witnessed such ill manners in the village."

Lawrence knew what Holo was trying to say.

Col seemed to catch up a bit later, and when he looked away uneasily, Holo elbowed him, as if to say, "Spit it out."

"...My father...was often like this."

Lawrence had no room to protest that none of this was his fault. "...I am sorry. Still—"

"Save your apologies. I want not answers. What I ask for is an

explanation. We are not your followers. We've no obligation to do as you tell us. Do I not speak the truth?"

She admonished him without anger, and her statement was effective because it was correct.

The two were not the innocent, helpless people they appeared to be.

They were each independent beings, perfectly capable of conceiving and carrying out their own plans.

To arbitrarily decide what to do right in front of them was itself a sort of betrayal.

"So then, what happened?" asked Holo, wearing a trace of a smile.

Despite having castigated him for his narrow vision, she seemed to acknowledge that he must have his reasons.

And stubbornness was not a merchant's way.

Lawrence shook his head—not to deny her words, but rather to clear his own mind.

He recalled the exchange in which he had engaged earlier.

"Eve invited me to act as her spy."

"Oh ho," said Holo briefly, putting the wine to her lips. She meant for him to continue.

"And the sender of that letter, Kieman, wants me to act as *his* spy as well."

"So you're trapped, then."

Lawrence nodded and continued on to the subject that was the root of the trouble.

"The reason for all of this is because the south side has captured a fishing boat from the north. That's all it will take to spark the conflict between the poor north and the wealthy southern sides. The southerners resorted to this because they wanted the valuable catch of the northerner's boat. Eve has been charged

with returning the prize to the north, but the one who gave her the order is not doing so out of loyalty to the north, but rather for his own profit. And Eve is merely pretending to go along with this; she plans to betray the north and has asked me to help."

The matter wouldn't be settled with mere hundreds of *lumione*.

And yet she was perfectly willing to conduct this deal, the value of which extended into thousands of gold coins.

"Quite a female," declared Holo with an irritated smirk. Col seemed to be afraid of making a conversational misstep, so he stared off into space.

"But since Eve declared her intention to betray the north, it's likely she's willing to betray anyone, is it not?"

Theoretically, two negatives equaled a positive, and the enemy of one's enemy was an ally. But only Eve knew whether her betrayal upon betrayal would work to her profit in the end.

"'Tis a bog of doubt, then, aye. When even your own pack is trying to use you to their own ends, I suppose 'tis no surprise your face is white with worry."

Holo took a swig from the wine cask and burped.

That she could say such things and drink wine as she did so was infuriating, but Lawrence only painted on a pained smile.

Besides, as the saying went, knights who survived the battlefield were ever smiling, and merchants were no different.

"Is there any solution that satisfies all parties?"

"Since Eve isn't truly working for the north, it shouldn't matter to her where her profit comes from. Which means she shouldn't mind receiving her share from the Rowen Trade Guild. It's possible that both Eve and the guild could profit. So as long as she doesn't decide to betray both me and the guild in order to take everything for herself, that could work."

"Hmm."

"Alternatively, I could act in favor of the guild's profit and try to exclude Eve entirely."

"Mmm... So we must either throw ourselves on the mercy of a villain or be blindly optimistic, eh?"

Otherwise, Lawrence would not be in this position—such was the logical conclusion.

Lawrence nodded and put his hands on the table.

"But this is all guesswork based on what I've been able to learn. In such a vast operation, there is too much I don't know. If I get involved, I can't help but be a pawn for those above me."

If Lawrence could plumb the depths of these schemes, he could turn them to his profit. But to do that, he had to understand exactly where those depths lay.

"So you're left with discretion being the better part of valor, eh?" said Holo.

"Yes," agreed Lawrence, taking the letter from Holo's hands.

As a lonely wandering merchant, how many times had the seal on that letter come to his aid? It was a magical emblem, both a powerful weapon and a sturdy shield.

He'd never doubted its might.

Which was why—now that its power was turned against him—he could see no alternative but escape.

"So that vixen and your pack are fighting over the same prize, then? What might that be?"

"Huh? Oh yes. It's what you say you saw on the south side."

"Surely not the bones?"

Lawrence and his party had come to the seaside town of Kerube, far from Holo's homelands of Yoitsu, in search of a certain item—the bones of what was said to be a wolf-god worshipped in the mountains of Roef.

Holo had discovered the possibility that the bones would be

used in an unforgivable manner by the Church, while Col wanted to learn the truth of his homeland's god.

Holo's tone was thus amused when she asked the question, but her eyes were not smiling.

The object in question was not so very far from the wolf bones as goods went, which was why the powers that be were in such a frenzy to acquire it.

"Something similar. A beast from the northern seas—a magical creature with a single horn. Eating its flesh grants long life, and a tincture of its horn cures disease. It's called a narwhal. Evidently one of the north side's fishing boats hauled one up in its nets."

Holo had been listening to Lawrence speak as though his words were a pleasant side dish to go with her wine, but suddenly her ear twitched.

"What's wrong?"

"...'Tis nothing."

The lie was so obvious it wasn't even worth laughing at.

"Still—"

"Yes?"

"You're certain that all this talk centers around that, aye?"

"Yes."

"In which case, you yet have choices you can make. Isn't that so?" Holo, amused, directed this last question to Col.

While Holo had been listening to Lawrence speak, Col watched the pair's exchange from the outside.

He was the obvious person to identify a third option.

"Er, ah, um..."

"Come now, be bold!"

Holo slapped his back, and Col finally summoned the courage to speak.

"E-er, couldn't Miss Holo simply...go and take the narwhal...?"

"...Huh?" was all Lawrence could manage in the face of Col's words.

The thought simply hadn't occurred to him.

"If there's a fight over some object, then the conflict hinges on the item itself. I'm sure Miss Holo can traverse the river in a single bound, so she should be able to steal it easily."

Col was, after all, from the deep mountains.

He spoke these flattering words with total sincerity, and Holo's ears twitched happily.

It was probably true that stealing the narwhal was in and of itself not a difficult thing for Holo.

No matter how well guarded it might be, in the face of the fangs of Holo's true form, the guards' armor would scarcely be more than the paper armor in which children clad themselves for play-acting. Despite all the plotting and planning of Eve, Kieman, and the other monstrous powers at play, it would be no great trouble for her to take the thing and run.

Lawrence scratched his head and spoke. "Look here, even if we do that, the question becomes what to do next. Even if the theft were simple, you would certainly be witnessed. At which point, the idea that anyone would then buy the narwhal from us is completely absurd. That much is—"

"I'm well aware of that. But"—Holo interrupted, her eyes narrowing with her smile and her head cocking to one side—"you must have seen how simple this all truly is. Have you not?"

"...Huh?"

"You haven't, then? The matter that has you so terrified you can think only of escape, I will tear open with my fangs and claws. To have my companion in such a dither over this is quite a problem. So much more the fool me for choosing you as such, I suppose."

"..."

Lawrence looked back at Holo; he was at a loss for words.

He had to admit she was right.

When it came to deception in the service of profit, Holo was capable of brazen cunning that would cause even the most jaded town merchant to grow dizzy.

Suddenly the things Lawrence had been so afraid of seemed very small. He could feel the blood flowing back into his once pale face and was unable to stop the reddening.

"Heh-heh-heh. You see, Col, my boy? This is what comes of letting a tempest in a teacup get the better of one."

Col, of course, looked abashed out of consideration for Lawrence, who would have preferred the boy to simply laugh at him.

Col regarded Lawrence with an almost girlish gaze on his upturned face, which Lawrence smiled at nervously. The boy returned the smile in evident relief.

The blood drained back out of his face, and Lawrence's cramped field of view seemed to expand.

"Always have your weapons at the ready," his master had once told him.

And next to him stood Holo, the Wisewolf of the forest of Yoitsu. There was a certain august dignity to her tail-swishing, wine-swilling form.

"Also, if you escape this current predicament, will it not be easier to find out more about the bones?"

"...Eve knows that, too. She told me that if I would cooperate with her, she would hand over what she knows about the bones. In other words, she's saying she wouldn't mind finding out what Ted Reynolds of the Jean Company supposedly knows."

Holo raised a single eyebrow, though whether the expression was one of anger or amusement was unclear. "Hmph. The vixen



is cooler headed than you are. Listen here—is our search for the bones so very different from the trouble you seem to have found yourself mixed up in now?"

Lawrence found himself speechless at the analogy.

Holo, of course, did not hold back. "When we began our pursuit of the bones, you warned me of this. But now you flinch away at the prospect of a similar challenge? At this rate..." The force drained from her angry face, and she looked away. "...I will begin to doubt your words."

These last words were spoken sadly, and she glanced up at the merchant briefly.

Lawrence knew he was being provoked. But it was only Holo's way of trying to motivate him.

"Did you not tell me you were that rare male good for more than talk?" she now inquired teasingly, her head tilted.

She beamed at Lawrence's sour face.

Pointless inflexibility was of no use in business, but that didn't mean he could always be perfectly rational.

Lawrence grumbled, his gaze downcast. "I suppose we can take escape out of the discussion."

"Aye. So now you can relax those shoulders of yours."

"Because you'll be here should the worst happen?"

If that was what it took to discover the truth behind the wolf bones, Holo would unsheathe her teeth and claws without a thought. But that was far from an ideal solution as far as Lawrence was concerned.

In response to his question, Holo shook her head and replied with a calm smile. "No, because you've no need to worry over who to sell this sea beast to once it's between my jaws. Just as the boy Col said, if the pups begin fighting over it, I should think the easiest solution would be for me to simply eat it."

"...I suppose it's not surprising I didn't think of that myself."

"That merely proves how little you were considering me," Holo replied. Standing between them, Col's gaze flicked back and forth from one to the other.

"Obviously," Lawrence shot back, which made Col look suddenly a bit worried.

Lawrence had to admit that from the outside, it must have appeared as though they were bickering. But Col soon seemed to understand otherwise. In contrast to her expression, Holo's tail was wagging.

"Hmph. You say such things, and yet how many times have you needed my aid? There's no great difference between the third and fourth time."

As much as he could, Lawrence wanted to avoid relying on Holo. Yet in spite of what he might say, she had delivered him from danger many times.

So while it might have seemed as though consequences were the only thing that mattered, lately Lawrence had began to suspect otherwise.

Which was why even as he admitted his reliance on her power, Lawrence faced those ears that could detect any lie and spoke.

"You are indeed the Wisewolf of Yoitsu, but that's not why I chose you as my traveling companion."

Holo ducked her head and giggled.

Col pretended not to be seriously attentive, but in front of him, Lawrence could say no more. It was doubtful if he would have been able to say more even if he had been alone with Holo.

"So you'll show me such cleverness as to impress even a wisewolf, then?"

"Of course," responded Lawrence shortly. "Of course."

Had he been alone, he would have fled—or let himself be used.

But there was a reason why a smile crept into a corner of Lawrence's mouth.

Truly? Was it truly wise to stand and face this mad situation?

He could not help but inwardly put the question to himself.

The inn at which the three were staying was one to which Eve had originally introduced them, and Kieman now knew its whereabouts as well. Thus, having decided not to flee the city, the only thing Lawrence could do was wait to be contacted.

If he were noticed attempting to collect information on his own, either by Kieman or Eve, it would not leave a very favorable impression.

Given that Lawrence's opponents held the advantage in both information and power, the only strategy available to him was to watch their movements and try to outwit them after the fact.

Intellectually, he was well aware of this, so he also knew that Holo's tactic of dozing on the bed with her tail flicking lazily to and fro was much better than his own, which involved sitting on a chair as his leg bounced restlessly.

Nevertheless, he sat on that chair by the window and gazed outside, unable to calm himself.

In this season, the cloudy skies darkened even the brightest of moods—all the more so when one was already gloomy.

Lawrence knew full well how small he was in the face of the schemes and greed of Eve and of Kieman. All he could do was sigh.

Holo had compelled him to stay in town rather than run, but having made the decision, he felt no better about it.

This was no one-on-one negotiation between merchants; this was a battle of many against many.

Never get involved with a business you don't understand,

his master had taught him, and yet here Lawrence was, breaking that very rule. He sighed again and surveyed their room in the inn.

There on the bed, Holo lay sleeping, having lost her battle with the demon slumber.

Col sat on the floor beside the bed, attending to his belt after having removed it from his waist. A short while earlier, he had borrowed a needle from the innkeeper, and Lawrence had assumed he intended to repair his belt, but it seemed the opposite was true.

Col pulled threads from his belt and tied them together to form a single long thread. He then threaded the needle with the result. Finally, he removed his shabby, beat-up coat, whereupon Lawrence finally understood his aim.

Lawrence stood and walked over to him. "If you're going to resort to that, soon you won't have any belt left at all."

Col had begun stitching away with the improvised thread, the needle moving adroitly through the fabric. The boy was practiced at this.

At Lawrence's words, Col looked up with an abashed smile but without ceasing his repairs.

The thread was quite short, so the mending was quickly finished.

From the perspective of a merchant who made his living by judging the quality of goods, such mending amounted to little more than a prayer to God.

"I'll buy you some thread, at the very least."

"Huh? No... I'm quite all right. See?" Col bit off the end of the thread and then held the coat up proudly.

Had Holo been watching, she probably would have smacked his head lightly and wagged her tail.

But Lawrence was not Holo, and so he simply put his hand on the boy's head. "I have yet to pay you back for explaining the mystery of the copper coins to me. Church scholars are paid for their lectures, are they not?"

Col seemed to want to reply, but appearing to weigh Lawrence's goodwill against his own modesty, he must have concluded that accepting the goodwill was the better choice.

He smiled sheepishly. "Would it really be all right?"

"Naturally. Shall we find a tailor and buy some thread? Wouldn't it be better to be able to do your mending sooner rather than later?"

Lawrence imagined that the money the thread would cost could probably purchase a better coat than the one currently in Col's possession, but he didn't say so.

The boy had summoned the courage to leave his village. Was the coat he had been given to mark the occasion truly worth so little?

It would hardly feel good to be told that the item that held so many memories was worth less than the thread it took to repair it.

"Well, then, thank you!" said Col happily, hurrying to shrug the coat back over his shoulders.

Lawrence thought to invite Holo along as well, but with her having just fallen asleep, even pinching her nose closed would not wake her, so he and Col left as a pair. Besides, if Kieman or Eve came calling, it would be better if there was someone in the room.

"So, which thread would you like?"

Having asked the innkeeper where to find a tailor, the two found the place with no trouble.

It seemed that only certain parts of the town had been thrown into chaos by the narwhal.

Power was power because it could not be shared; most people were not concerned about large-scale land ownership or town-wide reputation—such matters were as far above their heads as the moon.

Before meeting Holo, Lawrence himself had been one such moon gazer. Despite all the adventures he had been through with Holo, this quiet life was where he felt most at home.

The tailor shop at which they arrived had shutters open to a makeshift table upon which were arranged clothes, as well as thread and scrap cloth for patching.

The bored-looking boy minding the shop held his chin in hands that were dyed a dark color, probably owing to the fabric dyes he worked with.

He straightened and smiled as soon as he noticed Lawrence and Col, and seeing this, Lawrence returned the smile.

This world felt very familiar.

"So, the price varies with the color, but what do you think you'd like?" asked Lawrence.

"Hmm... since this is my coat's color, I suppose..."

The shopkeeper spoke up as Col looked down at his coat. "A nice pale yellow shouldn't stand out."

Yellow-dyed goods were a luxury item, and the side of the shop boy's smile made it clear just how true that was.

The boy seemed to be a year or two younger than Col but was probably a far tougher negotiator. Craftsmen's apprentices were often beaten and kicked. They were toughened up in a way Col had not been.

"Er, but can't yellow be quite..." Col seemed to understand that dye color affected price and hastily met Lawrence's gaze, but of course, the shop boy would hardly admit that openly.

"Ah, you must be the master of a great shop somewhere!" he said, brushing aside Col's words and leaning over the table. No doubt his own pay was based on the value of the goods he sold.

"It's a shame we didn't wear our finest out today," said Lawrence in response to the boy's merchant spirit.

The boy straightened his collar and puffed out his chest, leaving Col still silent. "Yes, yes, I quite take your meaning! Please do have a look at this here," said the boy, producing a sample of thread.

The thread in the boy's hand was no longer than his palm, but if it happened to blow away in the breeze, he would probably lose three days' rations to make up for it.

The yellow dye came from across the seven seas, from a flower called saffron whose blossoms flowed down the river that led to an earthly paradise. Its rich golden hue called to mind gold itself.

Dye of any kind was an expense, and the sole purpose of fine clothing was to flatter the wearer's pride. Since the wealthy bought such products without a thought, the price rose and rose.

In any case, Col seemed to have deduced where the conversation was heading and grabbed Lawrence's sleeve hastily.

"M-Mr. Lawrence—"

"Hmm?" Lawrence smiled and turned back as the young apprentice raised his voice in an effort to hold on to his customer.

"Good sir! Good sir, look, take a good look at this fine golden color! So pure a gold that even gold itself looks shabby beside it! This is my master's finest product. What say you, hmm?"

Lawrence nodded dutifully at the young salesman's urging.

Behind the boy, farther inside the shop, a man who was presumably the shop's master paused in his work to watch.

He seemed to be evaluating the boy's technique more than he was watching to see whether the thread sold or not.

Lawrence looked at the master, who seemed to notice him, and the two men shared a glance. The man gave a voiceless smile and raised his hand in greeting.

Lawrence replied with a nod and then turned his attention back to the boy. "It is indeed a fine gold. Bright as any metal."

"Is it not? So, if you please—"

"Still, wouldn't such fine thread be wasted on such a coat? If it's so bright as to cause even true gold to fade by comparison, won't it cause the seams to stand out?

In that instant, the boy's desperate business smile froze.

Behind the boy, Lawrence heard the master sigh helplessly.

"To make sure the seams aren't too visible, we'll take your cheapest gray thread."

Perhaps visions of the commission he had hoped to make from selling the golden thread had been dancing in his head, for the boy was at a loss for a reply. Behind him, the master stood and approached. "What length will you be needing?"

The man knocked the boy on the head with a rough hand worthy of a craftsman.

If he could not stand up to a clever merchant, he would never be able to sell his wares for a good price, no matter how skillfully they were made. The master seemed to be trying to teach his apprentice this lesson.

"How much could I get for three silver *lute*?"

"Indeed... in that frayed state, maybe enough to do five seams like it? And while you're at it, how about taking some of this blue thread off my hands? The dye's been coming off the boats like mad these days, so there's quite a lot."

"You should buy it while it's cheap, then, and sell it when the price rises."

The man smiled as though knowing it had been futile from the beginning. "Three *lute* worth, then," he said, taking down a spool of the gray thread.

Their shopping concluded, Lawrence and Col returned to the inn. They walked alongside the river and gazed at the town, Col following two steps behind Lawrence, holding the little sack that contained the thread and looking rather tired.

"What's wrong?" Lawrence asked, which made Col look away like a scolded puppy.

He was smart enough to know he had been made sport of, perhaps. But it seemed to have affected him more than Lawrence would have anticipated.

"Are you so very surprised?"

"...N-no, it's just..."

Col's eyes glanced this way and that.

Lawrence wondered if he had become too accustomed to traveling with a certain maliciously witty wolf.

"Holo's teasing is far worse than mine," said Lawrence, feeling a bit defensive.

This seemed to call something to Col's mind, and he nodded, embarrassed. "True," he admitted.

"And I seem to recall her telling you to be more shameless. I'm no god, just a merchant, so I don't show mercy unless begged."

Lawrence had not paid Col back for the salve, to say nothing for his solution to the coin puzzle. He wanted to reward the lad, but most merchants would have said nothing. Hardly any would remind a seller he had forgotten to demand payment. Lawrence agonized over which kind he was but finally decided in favor of honesty.

"Of course, if you were actually the sort of person who acted

shamelessly when told to, I suppose I wouldn't be traveling with you."

Instead of being embarrassed, Col smiled.

Lawrence could see why Holo liked him so much.

"Still, I may not be a god, but I don't mind being prayed to once in a while."

"Huh?"

"If I truly hated being asked for this or that, I wouldn't be traveling with certain fanged somebody."

At these words, Col grinned and tightened his grip on the burlap bag.

"But you're a future clergyman, so if you're not going to pray to me, at least let me give my confession."

"Eh... you mean...?"

"I confess that my behavior during the prior exchange was not exactly commendable," said Lawrence, looking away from Col.

Col was silent for only a moment, then soon caught on and straightened up, his expression turning serious, as one would expect from a priest. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean exactly that. I was taking my frustration out on you."

"Taking your frustration out?"

Col had a bad habit of becoming distracted by his own thoughts. As soon as he replied to Lawrence, he looked up, stumbled, and fell.

"You saw how troubled I was back at the inn, didn't you?" Lawrence couldn't bring himself to laugh at the boy during his own confession, so he merely held out a hand. When one stumbled, royalty blamed, nobility coughed, and commoners pretended to have done it on purpose.

But Col did none of those things.

He was going to become a fine clergy member.

"I did."

But at this answer, Lawrence could not help uttering a pained chuckle. Col hastily tried to take it back, but Lawrence waved him off. "No, no, it's fine. You may be my apprentice, but I can't very well strike your face just to save mine."

Looking a bit confused, Col smiled and then rubbed his own cheek.

"But after acting so pathetically, I wanted to get some of my pride back, you see."

"... So was that why you shared that look with the master in the shop, then?"

The boy had keen eyes indeed.

"That's right. I went over your head just to tease you. I just wanted to make you worry that I was going to buy you the most expensive thread... and feel a bit superior myself. Rather childish of me, I guess."

Lawrence scratched his neck as he looked out over the river.

Some merchants stood near a boat as it was being unloaded. He could hear their voices on the wind. They were trying to talk themselves on board so they could cross to the southern side.

But the town regulated river crossings during times of crisis. Crossing the river was an important connection indeed for the town's landowners. Lawrence doubted the boatman would risk taking the merchants across for a piddling bribe, which the merchants themselves surely knew. Yet they were still trying to cross, which went to show how significant the events currently playing out were.

Given all that, Kieman had still somehow managed to have his letter delivered to Lawrence, which yet again proved just how powerful he was.

"Your confession has been heard. God has surely forgiven you." Not only had Col heard him out, but also he had added the priest's standard phrase after doing so.

"Thank you," said Lawrence, trying to sound as grateful as he could.

"Still, Mr. Lawrence—"

"Hmm?"

"You had another reason for doing that, didn't you?"

Col looked straight at Lawrence. His gaze held not a trace of malice, which made Lawrence feel all the more impaled by it.

"You were trying to meet Miss Holo's expectations, weren't you?"

The boy's eyes shone as if he were a child listening to a heroic tale, so brightly that they were almost painful to regard.

Lawrence could not help but turn away from him out of shame. "I can't say that...wasn't part of it, too," he finally managed to answer.

Confirming his own negotiation ability was the source of his unease.

"I know I can't do very much to help you, Mr. Lawrence, but please keep at it!"

"R-right."

It seemed like Col was putting every ounce of his slim frame's strength into supporting Lawrence. Lawrence was sure that if he had been in the boy's position and seen someone older than him act in such a shameful manner, his esteem for his elder would have fallen.

The only reason he thought to buy the thread for Col and toyed with the shop boy was in service of his own sense of superiority.

Not only did Col not mind, he was actually cheering Lawrence on. Part of that could be ascribed to Col's personality, but mysteries yet remained.

And a merchant's curiosity ran deeper than any cat's.

"And despite my looking so pathetic—a sad little merchant taking his frustrations out on those beneath him—you still hold me in some esteem? You're a strange lad, that's certain," said Lawrence, and unsurprisingly, Col was taken aback.

He had not intended to flatter Lawrence; he had simply been speaking his mind. "Huh...? But...I mean...you're traveling with Miss Holo, aren't you? She told me you were looking for her homelands."

"True, but...?"

"So doesn't that mean that the problem we're facing now is large enough to justify your concern?"

Lawrence did not understand what Col was getting at. It was true that the obstacle before them was beyond what a traveling merchant could handle, and even with Holo's support he felt far from confident.

But he got the feeling that Col's words referred to something else.

Did he mean that simply being able to travel with Holo implied that Lawrence was formidable in his own right, and therefore any problem that worried him this much had to be a serious matter?

Or was it something else?

Lawrence mulled it over and then realized something.

Col continued speaking. "I mean, this journey is the continuation of Holo's legend, isn't it? So the problems you face have to be worthy of such a tale! I'm truly grateful to be able to be part of the story," he said, revealing an innocent smile.

Tales of adventure were passed down from traveler to traveler along the road, in every inn and town. But it had been more than ten years since Lawrence had last longed to one day be involved in such a tale himself.

Even Col, who was so clever and logical he could leave any merchant in his wake felt the same way.

Surely there was not another boy so guilelessly charming as this one.

"It's true; she does say she'll speak of this journey grandly in legends to come. But that's all the more reason I need to behave properly for you."

Lawrence meant it as a joke, and Col's eyes went wide as he smiled. "I don't want to be thought of as a burden when our tale is told!"

It was a reply to a joke that could never have been made in front of Holo.

Lawrence shook his head lightly, sighing and looking up. "Well, in any case, there's one thing we must be very careful of indeed. We must cooperate to make absolutely certain we never anger her."

Col was clever enough not to take his words for their surface meaning. He seemed happy, which meant he must have understood what Lawrence was trying to say.

"Sometimes I act shamefully, as I did earlier. I need someone's help to stop me from doing it."

"I understand!" replied Col. "I'll do whatever I can."

Lawrence was up against opponents who were well used to fighting battles on multiple fronts. He needed every ally he could get.

What was it that Holo had said to him? Her admonishment that he should get used to using people could have meant that he would have to start trusting them. In this battle of many versus many, such advice would surely be all the more important.

Lawrence shook hands with Col, his mood much improved. When it came to reaffirming his faith in his negotiation skills,

that handshake was hundreds of times more effective than the pathetic banter with the tailor's shop boy.

Holo was probably snickering back on the bed even then.

"Well, shall we return?" asked Lawrence, turning back toward the inn.

"Yes!" Col followed diagonally behind Lawrence.

The cloudy, unpleasant weather suddenly did not seem so very bad.

CHAPTER FIVE



Returning to the inn with Col, they found Holo fast asleep, curled up in her blanket and snoring away quietly.

Lawrence exchanged a wordless smile with Col, and in that moment, Holo's snoring abruptly stopped.

Either she was simply that sensitive to any sort of discussion about her, or the delicate hairs in her ears picked up the faint movements in the air upon their entry.

Holo opened her eyes slowly, then buried her head beneath the blankets, her whole body quivering as she yawned.

"So, truly—what shall we do?" she asked.

Holo could tell that Col had gone out with Lawrence, and she called him straight over, sniffing him audibly.

No doubt she had an ulterior motive—that of demanding a share of any food they might have bought.

Col looked faintly abashed, shrinking at the attention.

"A traveling merchant cannot hope to survive without a guild. So at the very least, I cannot oppose them."

"'A big tree makes fine shelter,' eh? I suppose it gives a bit of freedom to the small-fry beneath it—'tis probably the right choice."

Holo's tone was much like Eve's when she had tried to convince Lawrence to betray his guild, and it was all he could do to grin ruefully and hear her out.

Holo was pointing out that since he was hardly an important figure in the town, he had the luxury of being able to move fairly freely despite the ongoing incident.

Calling him "small-fry" seemed harsh, but Lawrence had to admit it was accurate.

"Still, the greatest short-term profit would be had by taking the narwhal to Eve."

"And then make our escape, hand in hand? That might be rather amusing."

Without Holo, would such a dangerous, adventurous option have been available? Lawrence thought about it for a moment and concluded that if not for Holo, he would have long since removed himself from this dangerous situation entirely.

He slumped at the absurdity of it all, which made Holo grin maliciously, her tail wagging easily.

If you're so afraid of that possibility, just say so—but she did not say it, and neither did Lawrence.

It would have been a shame to pull the curtain up on their little drama so soon. They had to be considerate of their audience—Col.

"So, then. Given that both Eve and the guild know where we're staying, there's no telling when we'll get drawn up into danger. I'd like to make sure I have a full grasp of the situation so I don't react badly when that happens," said Lawrence. Holo gazed at him wordlessly for a while before smiling faintly.

"What is it?" he asked, but she only shook her head without answering.

Nevertheless, Lawrence had some idea why she was smiling.

She looked at him as if he were a small child who had fallen and was trying not to cry.

"Mm." Holo nodded and tapped Col's head—he was sitting beside her.

Col was one of them now.

"Please, go on!" Col replied to Lawrence, who began his explanation.

The inn was also a tavern, and it was late enough into the night that their orders of wine were fulfilled by a yawning innkeeper.

Lawrence had expected that either Kieman or Eve would come calling, but there was no news from either of them. He sipped wine out of sheer nervous energy, but his worry was so much effort in vain.

By contrast, Holo got Col quite drunk, as usual.

Once she was able to confirm that the intoxicated boy was asleep, she would move back to her own bed. Holo insisted that if she did not get him drunk, he would sleep on the floor.

Lawrence was not sure if she was doing him any favors or not. Her methods were extreme; that much was certain.

"Now then, this will finish off our day nicely."

Given that he had made a fool of himself twice that day, Lawrence had gone to fetch more wine from downstairs, though he knew it did not constitute an apology.

Holo seemed to expect as much, but Lawrence could tell that she was a bit disappointed at his meek obedience. She even seemed annoyed at his ordering of the last bottle, as she felt it excessive.

Usually she would make a dissatisfied face upon encountering the end of the evening's drinking, but now, if anything, she seemed relieved.

Her ability to be so thoroughly dishonest about her own desires was a cunning, wolfish thing indeed.

And yet Holo was still Holo.

"Ah, well, for my part I only wish you'd bring your whimpering to an end." She tried to pull her tail out from under Col's head at the corner of the bed and took the bottle from Lawrence's hand, a nasty smile on her face.

She was being so childish that it seemed likely she would enjoy his silence even more than a clumsy retort.

But if she got too happy, her wagging tale would surely wake the sleeping Col, so Lawrence formed a careful reply.

"Yet ask any mercenary, and they'll tell you the strong die first. I'd say some pathetic whimpering is just right."

"Fool," declared an unamused Holo, looking back down at Col. She grabbed his ears and pulled his head slightly up, evidently still trying to pull her tail free. It seemed a little extreme to Lawrence, until he noticed the drool that threatened to fall from the boy's mouth onto her tail. "I can't let my guard down," said Holo, sighing in relief as she stroked her now-freed tail.

Lawrence watched her and popped a chilled roasted bean into his mouth before going and opening the window slightly. A group of men were passing by, and from the unsteadiness of their gaits, it seemed likely they were returning home after a night's drinking. If things were so bad that men were wandering around drunkenly despite there being no festival, then the city was in a bad way indeed.

Assuming the northern landowners were in charge, it seemed best to assume they were losing their ability to hold things together.

The narwhal could change everything.

More and more, Lawrence was coming to understand just how important it was.

"I am right here, and yet you gaze out the window?"

Holo had moved to a chair and helped herself to a handful of roast beans.

There was a boldness to her crunching away that made him somehow happy.

Lawrence shrugged and closed the windows. "We still need to be ready to escape at a moment's notice."

The answer seemed to satisfy Holo. She chuckled, picked up a bean that had fallen, and ate it. "I suppose 'tis true enough. Will you not drink with me a bit? 'Tis a sad thing to drink on one's own."

Holo poked at his cup of wine with her finger, causing ripples on the surface of the wine he had just poured into it.

Looking down at it, Lawrence realized he had not even finished half of his first cup. "Why not? It seems unlikely we'll get a message at this hour."

"Of that we cannot be certain."

"Huh?" inquired Lawrence, regarding Holo from across the table.

"Vixens have excellent night vision."

Lawrence thought it over for a moment, then shrugged and replied, "All the more important to drink now, then."

"Huh?"

"If I collapse unconscious from too much drink, there's no need to worry about how I might be tricked."

Holo grinned, revealing a fang. "Fool. If you fall asleep and expose your belly, our tale will come to an early end."

"I can't imagine the wolf would let the fox steal her prey so easily," replied Lawrence, which made Holo's grin widen, showing her other fang.

"That's a bit hard to know. After all, my prey is always showing me its belly. 'Tis all too easy to become careless and believe there's no need for haste. Such thinking is dangerous."

Having come to this point, Lawrence could not resist making some kind of comeback. "But your tail's just as exposed. If you

would take me by surprise, you'd best be careful I don't grab your tail."

"And I suppose you want me to insist that you'd never dare such a thing, hmm?" Holo's elbows were on the table, her ears flicking rapidly; Lawrence felt a bit irritated.

He knew he was being teased, but he took a drink and responded, "And yet you're hiding something about the narwhal from me."

Immediately after saying so, he was the one who ended up surprised.

Holo grinned and brought her wine cup to her mouth, but then twitched in surprise.

If she had been acting, then Lawrence would have lost their little game—but Holo was genuinely shocked.

Her eyes moved away, realizing that she could not hide that she had been taken by surprise. She bit her lip and glared at Lawrence.

"I'm even more surprised than you are," said Lawrence by way of excuse.

At this, Holo's brow furrowed, and she took a deep breath. After a good interval, she heaved a wine-scented sigh.

"And this is why such fools as you are...," she muttered, gulping down what wine remained.

Lawrence should have had the advantage, but for some reason, he waited for Holo to speak again, like a child expecting to be scolded.

"I don't care what sort of face you make, I'm not saying. I do not wish to," she said, and she looked away sullenly.

Her angry yet childish demeanor had to be on purpose.

She might have been trying to lead him into a trap or simply trying to buy time in order to regroup.

As Lawrence pondered which it was, Holo's ears and tail became vital indicators.

Just as hunters and trappers communicated with smoke signals, Lawrence translated the subtle movements of Holo's appendages.

She was trying to hide her embarrassment—or something like that. "Ah," he couldn't help but say the moment he realized it.

"If you say another word, I truly *will* be angry," Holo said, still looking away, her eyes shut.

Lawrence agonized over whether to laugh or not, finally bringing his wine cup to his lips as a diversion—that was as much of a conclusion as he could come to.

Holo knew about the narwhal.

If so, she must also be aware of the legends and rumors surrounding it—that its flesh conferred long life and medicine made from its horn cured any illness.

Then it was all Lawrence could do to think back on the events of his travels with Holo thus far.

What was it that her long life had led her to fear above all else?

And yet even Holo could not have known everything at the time of her birth. She must have been a stubborn child at some point herself—must have run around like a fool at least once or twice in her life.

Even now, if she could make a wish, surely it would be this: to somehow bridge the great difference in their ages.

"...I thought you'd realized and were merely pretending not to know for my sake—more the fool me, I suppose."

She seemed to have concluded from Lawrence's expression that he had finally caught up. She spoke as though at a loss for anything else and again brought her wine to her lips.

Lawrence was relieved to see that she seemed neither sad nor

on the verge of tears, because it showed that even stricken by a mistake made in the distant past, her face could still smile.

"No... to be completely honest, I thought you were completely ignorant about such things. I never guessed you'd know about the legend."

The stories of immortality or omnipotent cures were surely only of interest to humans, after all. He had never guessed they would be of any concern to Holo and the rest of her kind.

"Fool..." Holo roughly wiped away a bit of wine that clung to the corner of her mouth with her sleeve and then fell forward on the table as if exhausted.

Given how tightly her hand held her cup, though, it might simply have been intoxication.

"So you once pursued a narwhal?" Lawrence asked, and Holo nodded.

It had to have been centuries ago.

"Though 'tis true that at the time I was an ignorant pup, I believed I could change everything about the world I found distasteful. When I hated being rescued or relied upon, I would journey, and when I had no friends, I would make them. I believed such pleasant times would last forever," she reflected, sounding vaguely amused, still lying on the table as she fingered some of the beans that had spilled off the plate.

Even now, Holo held back from being truly honest. If this was how she ended up after weathering such ages of wind and rain, then she must truly have been even sharper in her younger days.

"Still, I cried a lot as well, for all my bluster. You'd probably have liked it."

Holo grinned and moved her eyes to focus on Lawrence.

She flicked beans at him, which he could only respond to by making a face and retreating into his wine.

"Heh... but, aye. The more painful the memories one recollects, the better the laughter."

"I can't argue with that." Lawrence had laughed to himself while driving his cart many times, lost in reflection over his past failures.

But that was not something he wanted to do too often, and the reason was clear—he had lacked someone with whom to share those memories. And yet he immediately realized such thoughts had no place in his mind.

Across the table, the keen-eyed wolf regarded him and smiled.

"But now I have you," she said without a trace of embarrassment, and he could only respond by flicking a bean back at her.

"You have Col, too."

"I cannot talk like this with Col. The lad—he's the weight stone that reminds me I am a wisewolf."

What did she mean by that? Lawrence's finger froze preflick as he thought it over.

Col was from a village in the mountains of the north. He viewed Holo as the protagonist of an ongoing legend.

Which meant there could be only one reason why she would regard him as a weight.

Her finger suddenly flicked at where Lawrence's finger lay.

"Col worships me as a wisewolf. He was foolish enough to want to touch my tail the moment he saw it. It's been centuries since such a thing has happened to me. It reminded me of long ago and made me happy... He's a good lad, and he reminds me that I am a wisewolf."

Holo's index finger curled around Lawrence's where the two touched.

"It's true, you have been easier to get along with recently."

"Heh. I've no excuse."

If Holo was to be taken at her word, Col's worship of her as a

wisewolf had reminded her that she *was* a wisewolf. And as for why that would be, the answer was obvious.

It was Holo the Wisewolf who was worthy of the forest of Yoitsu, not some idle girl whiling away her time with a traveling merchant.

"Still," Lawrence said after a certain amount of wordless finger play between the two of them. "For you to keep that from me, after haranguing me so much over consulting you before deciding what to do..."

How many troubles had arisen from each of them keeping their hearts secret from the other?

It pained him to have to say this, of course, but Holo answered without rancor. "If I discuss matters of business openly, my own gain will be less, will it not?" If she had not said it with such a mischievous smile, it would have been hard to accept with even the most rueful of grins.

Holo sat up and stretched, her ears flicking.

Both of them knew how important it was that they not grow too close. And yet that very awareness meant the opposite was happening—Lawrence had kicked the rule aside himself before.

Even Holo must have kicked at the stones along the path of her long, long life once or twice.

And yet none of that changed reality.

Holo had called Col a weight that anchored her belief in herself as a wisewolf, and she surely was not exaggerating. While it might be amusing for her to use the boy to tease Lawrence, she also did this out of self-defense—to make sure she never crossed the line. To hide the awful reality she understood but could do nothing about. As an excuse.

"Aye, we're all greedy, always running about in service of our own gain."

"On that count, I'm forced to agree. Of course...," said Lawrence



with a trace of irony. "...Of course, if I weren't so greedy, I'd be able to buy you tastier food."

Holo laughed, tickled at the joke, then stood from the chair.

Her face was red, so she was probably too warm. As he had guessed, she opened the window slightly and narrowed her eyes in pleasure at the cool breeze.

"Mm. But is seeing my pleasure not in your interests as well?" Holo closed her eyes as the cool air caressed her cheek, looking like a purring cat. She then opened a single eye and regarded Lawrence with it.

Her movements were so perfectly performed it was as if she was watching herself in a mirror.

"If you were truly so easily bribed by food, then that might be so."

Holo closed her eye again at the counterattack.

Her ability to repeat a gesture she had made just seconds earlier, this time seeming to sulk, was amazing.

A few moments later, Holo was every bit the arrogant noblewoman. "And what other methods could you use?"

Lawrence remembered when a village with which he had once traded asked him to sell the wine barrels they produced to a nearby abbey that possessed a large vineyard.

The abbot there was a proud and stingy man, making all sorts of demands of Lawrence, who had to work very hard indeed to complete the sale.

Being a member of a wealthy abbey, the abbot surely felt himself closer to God than Lawrence and thus privileged to look down upon him.

Yet the wisewolf before Lawrence's very eyes hated being treated as the god she was—so why would she affect such haughtiness?

The abbot cared little for the losses of those who sold to him and was concerned only with his own profits.

So given that the starting conditions here were the opposite of that, then the conclusion was likewise the opposite.

Lawrence said what she wanted him to say.

"If food is out, then with words or manners."

"Neither of which is so very reliable in your case."

He had become so used to her malicious, fanged grin that it had even more charm than a normal smile. And if neither his words nor his manner could be trusted, there was only one option that remained.

In order to fully display its truth, Lawrence had to stand up from his chair.

Or perhaps remaining seated in order to avoid fleeing from Holo was the better option.

Both had their charms, Lawrence knew. He took a drink of his wine and replied.

"Or you could imagine you've been deceived and decide to trust both. They might well turn out to be genuine."

"..."

The words of Eve, wolf of the Roam River, worked to marvelous effect.

Holo glared at Lawrence out of the corner of her eye, her tail twitching in irritation. She had no means to counterattack.

It felt good to have, for once, the upper hand in their banter—better even than when he had teased the shop boy at the tailor's shop. Defeat turned the mightiest eagle into a pathetic chicken, and likewise, victory made the most timid mouse into a bold wolf.

Yet trueborn wolves were ever cunning.

"That is not what I meant to say," she said angrily, her expression lonely.

Where playful banter was meant to be a battle of logic and intimation, Holo's weapons were unfair.

If their exchange thus far was akin to a business negotiation, then what Holo had just employed had the power to transcend that.

So what was it that surpassed proper negotiation?

There in front of that window, Lawrence had said something unnecessary. "We have to be ready to run."

Holo's gaze was directed out the window, but her ears were pointed at him.

She did not bother giving voice to her frustration.

It was absurd to even think of winning against her.

"How about treating the loser kindly once in a while?" Lawrence stood and walked over to her. Having delivered his statement beside her, he then sat on the windowsill.

Holo chuckled soundlessly, then sat on his lap.

"The victor can say nothing to the loser."

"Saying as much while always having your way, you must really fear nothing."

Her ears brushed his cheeks, making him ticklish, as she leaned into him. This wisewolf certainly was full of excuses.

"Still, I suppose I can trust you at least a bit."

"Oh? Merchants may well seem sincere as they bow down, but inside they're sticking their tongues out."

Lawrence had to admit the words felt rather artificial, but in any case Holo gave him no quarter.

"'Tis true, men and beasts alike stick their tongues out when defeated."

"Guh..." Frustrating though it was, he had nothing with which to reply, so he slumped back against the windowsill.

Holo chuckled and spoke slowly. "But 'tis also true that neither you nor I are alone when defeated."

Given the events of the day, her words were heavy with meaning. Lawrence drew Holo into an embrace and replied, "I'll remember that."

Holo's tail swished, and she nodded slightly.

In that quiet moment, the loudest sound was that of Col's intoxicated snoring.

Remembering that Holo was every bit a wisewolf was effective when it came to avoiding shortsightedness, but whether or not that was a good or bad thing, Lawrence did not know.

At the very least, it certainly acted as an effective counterweight, protecting the delicate balance of the scales.

Holo smiled, her eyes closed; perhaps she was thinking the same thing.

Lawrence put his arms around her to more closely embrace her small body, and in that moment—

"Mmph," she muttered, sounding irritated as she looked up suddenly.

"Wh... what's wrong?"

Lawrence tried to keep his calm, but sweat broke out on his brow nonetheless.

Holo certainly noticed as much and grinned, her tail wagging. She then slowly rose, her ears busily rotating this way and that.

The reason for her suddenly darkened expression was soon clear.

"My. I suppose one's premonitions are not so easily discounted."

Lawrence quickly understood to what her words referred.

Holo directed her gaze out the window, and Lawrence did likewise.

"See, there's the master of that poor shop. What was his name again...?"

"Reynolds, eh?"

Lawrence spotted the hurrying form of a portly man in a too-small coat, trying to keep his distance from the drunkards as he made his way down the street. The way he hewed to the edge

of the street while looking closely at everyone around him was obviously unnatural.

"'Tis a good opportunity for you to prove the courage of your convictions."

Spending no time wondering why Reynolds had come to the inn, Lawrence spoke into Holo's ear before she stood. "Make sure you pretend you're asleep."

Holo was acting like a child, but her nasty smile made it clear she was deeply pleased. "While sticking my tongue out, eh?"

Putting many meanings into a single word was her specialty.

Lawrence knew that no matter how he answered, he would be trapped, so he brushed her tail roughly aside as his only reply.

While the fewer people who knew about it made a secret more secure, it was another story entirely when one of the privy parties showed up himself for a secret late-night meeting.

It was the antithesis of Eve and Kieman's approach of sending others to contact Lawrence.

"Apologies for the late hour." Despite the cold, Reynolds's paunch made his breath run ragged and forehead sweaty, although some of that could be ascribed to nervousness.

His voice was low, but not out of consideration for Holo and Col, who were curled up together on the bed, sleeping.

"Shall we speak outside?" Lawrence asked, but Reynolds glanced over his shoulder at this, then looked back and shook this head. It was very like a town merchant not to want to speak of secrets out in the open.

By contrast, a traveling merchant preferred to have sensitive conversations out in a wide field or on a lonely road where a simple look was all it took to confirm that no one was listening. Indoors, there was no way to know who had his ear pressed to the wall in the next room over.

"Some wine?" Lawrence asked, gesturing to a chair.

Reynolds shook his head briefly but then reconsidered. "Perhaps just a bit. When I see that you're not drunk, Mr. Lawrence, it makes me think that coming here wasn't a waste of my time."

A traveler's room at an inn was not lavish enough to properly entertain a guest. Lawrence poured some wine into the cup Col had used and offered it to Reynolds, who smiled ingratiatingly.

"You're here about the narwhal... correct?"

For Reynolds to come all the way out to the inn at this hour, he must have concluded that Lawrence knew about it.

Lawrence had come to Reynolds's shop bearing Eve's introduction letter and asking about wolf bones—and anyone formidable enough to get such a letter from Eve would have had to know about the source of the commotion in Kerube.

At the same time, there was little point in asking how Reynolds had discovered where they were staying. Even Kieman, all the way across the river, had been able to uncover that much.

To a town merchant, the streets of their homes were like the strands of a spiderweb.

Lawrence mulled the situation over as he sat, and Reynolds nodded.

But now Reynolds was in the weaker position. "I haven't the faintest notion of what's happening. I was hoping that you, Mr. Lawrence, might know something."

Lawrence had once heard a drunken merchant long ago say that a woman could look so different in candlelight than in the midday sun, one could hardly believe it was the same person—and it was true for merchants, too.

Reynolds was acting every bit the panicked owner of a sad little shop, but no matter how panicked he might have been, there was still no reason for him to come to the inn room of Lawrence, a mere traveling merchant. And certainly not at this hour.

Much was being omitted from Reynolds's words.

"Unfortunately, I don't know any details myself..."

"You've been to the Lydon Inn, haven't you?"

If he was getting to the point so quickly, he must have been running out of time—or perhaps this was just how Reynolds did business.

Lawrence slowly turned his gaze elsewhere, then just as slowly, moved it back to Reynolds. "The Lydon Inn?"

He was better at deception now, probably a result of having spent so much time with Holo, who was first-rate at it.

Reynolds's expression froze, probably out of surprise that Lawrence was proving harder to take off guard than he had anticipated. "Lies benefit neither of us. I already know you've been there."

Reynolds set his cup down and opened his palms to Lawrence. It was a gesture inviting mutual openness but held no special meaning between merchants.

Lawrence thought.

The fact that he had been summoned to the Lydon Inn by Eve was exposed, but it was still in his best interests to keep the nature and contents of that visit a secret.

"I suppose if I were to say I went there for some friendly chatter, you wouldn't believe me, would you, Mr. Reynolds?" queried Lawrence with a small, tired sigh.

Even Holo, who could see through any lie, would have trouble determining the truth of those words. There were any number of ways to phrase things that made them mysterious, both truth and falsehood at once.

Lawrence continued. "I learned of the situation in the town from Eve. What I told her then was that she had quite a lot of nerve to summon me in such an easily misunderstood manner to such an easily misunderstood place amid such unrest."

The sound of rustling cloth came from the direction of the bed. It was Holo turning over—probably to hide the grin on her face.

Lawrence continued.

"Eve seems to be in a unique position in this town, and despite the placid expression on her face, her mind must be swirling with notions. But she did not see fit to tell me about them."

"Truly?" replied Reynolds immediately, his eyes widening with surprise.

"Truly." The more obvious the statement, the more persuasive it would be.

Reynolds peered at Lawrence, almost glaring at him, before finally relaxing and heaving a sigh. "...My apologies."

"Not at all. For you to be so worried, I assume you have some direct connection to all this?"

Changing the tone of the conversation was a common trick; Lawrence could not drop his guard just because Reynolds seemed to have relaxed.

"Quite the opposite. I'm worried precisely because I've been left entirely out." He sighed and shifted heavily in his chair.

Lawrence recalled that the Jean Company was having its profits sucked away by the landlords of the town.

In business, when things are going well, sometimes still more lucrative opportunities arise—but the opposite also holds true.

In such times, it is all too common to have friends abandon you. Such moments are frequent in the travels of merchants, whose lives often hang in the balance.

And Reynolds had conducted a successful business on the otherwise poorer north side of town, which had surely made him few friends—and now he lacked even the funds to gain support.

It was clear that when things came to a head, he would be left on his own.

"Still, I'm sure you've heard, haven't you? I've a good connection with the powerful men of this town," said Reynolds.

It would have been better for him if he had intended that remark simply to make himself sound more important. But the statement was heavy with implication. Reynolds had concluded that Lawrence had learned quite a bit about the town's situation from Eve.

Given that, if he had gone so far as to sneak all the way out here in the middle of the night to talk about the narwhal, then Lawrence could make a guess as to what he was thinking—essentially, either Eve would be an important figure in the tumult surrounding the narwhal or was at least in a position to gather information about it.

And many of the things Eve had revealed in her one-sided grumbling to Lawrence earlier in the day now gained the tint of truth.

"Given that you're in the copper trade, as far as that goes."

"Heh." Reynolds could not help but chuckle at Lawrence's roundabout statement, scratching his nose.

Lawrence had nothing to add and so sipped his wine. At length, Reynolds looked up and continued.

"Just as when you all came by to ask after the wolf bones, I thought maybe I could turn the tables," he said, rubbing his face.

Nothing is less reliable than a merchant's friendly smile, but Reynolds's smile seemed to lay his heart bare.

The Jean Company was still in dire straits, and Reynolds certainly wanted to free himself of the north side's yoke.

"I came with the slightest hope of connecting with the wolf of the Roam, but... heh, seems I've only caused a fuss," said Reynolds with a pathetic smile, his cheeks slackening.

Lawrence had nothing to say and could only smile in sympathy.

Silence then fell, which was broken at length by Holo's quiet sleep mumbling.

"Ah...I suppose it's late. Again, I'm sorry," Reynolds apologized and then stood.

Lawrence didn't want to admit it, but for Reynolds to have come all the way to the inn at this hour, he must have exhausted all other options and come to the end of his rope.

The furtiveness of his visit was not because he needed to keep their meeting a secret, but rather that he did not want anyone to see him reduced to asking an outsider for help.

When this occurred to Lawrence, Reynolds's sagging cheeks seemed somehow very sad indeed.

"Not at all. I'm sorry I couldn't be of any help."

"And I'm sorry, too, that I couldn't give you any good answers to your questions."

They each smiled as though trying to be considerate of the other as they exchanged words across the table.

Their smiles turned sheepish at the sudden silence that descended. They shook hands.

"Should you meet the wolf again, tell her that Reynolds has a bone to pick with her."

"Yes...quite. I'll do that," Lawrence answered, forcing the smile from his face.

"Again, I'm truly sorry for the late hour," Reynolds said, making one last apology as he headed for the room's door, his footsteps much heavier than they had been when he arrived. "Good night to you."

In the dark hallway, Lawrence watched him put his coat back on. "Good night," he replied.

Reynolds descended the stairs and disappeared into the darkness.

Despite his shop in the town and his monopoly over the copper trade, which would provide a lifetime of security, there was something about watching Reynolds recede that made



the man seem like a defeated man, an abandoned dog. It was just too sad.

Lawrence returned to the room, sighing softly and sitting back down in his chair. His elbow on the table, he sipped some wine and reviewed the conversation in his mind. The weight of the situation bore down on him yet again.

Even Reynolds, a merchant with a fair amount of power, was that desperate in his pursuit of the narwhal.

Or no—perhaps there was a better way to put it.

He was *this* desperate for it.

"Well... time for bed, I suppose," Lawrence murmured to himself, blowing out the candle and making for his bed.

He passed first by the bed in which Col and Holo slept and then put his hand on his own bed. He wrapped himself in a blanket and curled up, sighing helplessly.

His eyes had not yet adjusted to the dark, but he could see Holo's open eyes in the bed next to his.

"So he's gone, has he?" she said, seeming to disappear for a moment, probably because she had turned in the opposite direction.

Lawrence closed his eyes briefly. "Sorry to put you through all that," he said.

"Still, I was relieved you did not speak up to me immediately after," said an amused Holo, sitting on the bed.

As Lawrence had guessed, Reynolds had probably crept quietly back up the stairs and pressed his ear to the door, in case Lawrence were to tell the truth of the situation to Holo or Col.

"I suppose I'm not surprised," said Lawrence, smiling. "I suppose I did well, then."

"Heh-heh. He was acting so truly sad that I nearly fell for it myself. I wouldn't have thought him capable of such guile!"

"Merchants carry items both hot and cold in their purses.

While his feelings may have been true, he won't be giving up just yet."

"Merchants are rather stubborn creatures, are they not?"

"They surely are." Lawrence grinned. "But"—he added—"what do you think Reynolds's true goal was?" He ventured to put the question to Holo, since he had already figured it out for himself.

Holo's answer was immediate. "He wishes to contact the vixen. He'll do anything to do it."

"So that's really it..."

"What are you thinking?" Holo grinned maliciously as she pushed off the bed with her hands. Despite her question, her face made it clear she already knew the answer.

"Nothing. I only thought it was an interesting conversation."

Holo continued to smile as she flicked her ears, obviously able to tell the half-truth from the half-lie.

Merchants put both hot things and cold things in their purses.

At a loss for anything else, Lawrence put his hands behind his head.

Hopefully the posture would convey that despite his trepidation, his curiosity had overcome his fear and he was now interested in getting involved.

No matter how easily Holo might see through him, he still had his pride as a man—but Holo could no doubt already tell that was exactly what he was thinking.

She sat beside him on the bed, smiling a full, bright smile.

If he went along with her on this, no doubt the wisewolf would be very pleased indeed. But that was only as long as his curiosity was greater than his fear.

Holo had but to playfully tug at the facade and it would come tumbling down. It was too miserable to imagine.

If it came to that, this carefully balanced feeling of play would be destroyed.

"I'm going to sleep," said Lawrence, turning his back to Holo and lying down.

If the mood turned sour, he would be able to sense it.

But Holo only swished her tail once and said a quiet "Good night."

The sound of her rustling beneath the covers was strangely loud.

Holo would not break her favorite toy.

Which meant Lawrence's course of action was clear.

He loved seeing her happy, so he would be the toughest toy he possibly could.

The next morning.

Lawrence was no Holo, but he did have premonitions of his own sometimes.

One came as Holo put an extra-large piece of cheese atop the rye bread left over from the provisions they had laid in for their river journey; she excused this by saying she was finishing up leftovers.

Even Col had to laugh at her wolfing the bread down, until Holo's face went pale and her smile disappeared.

Lawrence wondered if she had bit her tongue, but fortunately before he could say so, he understood the true cause.

The innkeeper, who should have been busy seeing off departing patrons or tending to breakfast service, had come to visit their room.

Had that been all, Holo would have been content to cover herself with her robe.

But Lawrence caught a sudden, meaningful glance from her, and when Col opened the door, the innkeeper was indeed there—accompanied by one other.

"Good morning, Mr. Lawrence" came a steady, clear voice matching its owner's confidence.

Dressed impeccably, it was none other than Lud Kieman.

"...Good morning to you," replied Lawrence, by which time the innkeeper had already accepted a few silver coins from Kieman.

They were nothing to Kieman, who offered them by way of a vague apology for bothering the innkeeper during his busy morning. And although he made it seem quite natural, he was purposely allowing Lawrence to witness this display.

"I see you're taking breakfast. My apologies for the interruption."

Lawrence got the distinct sense that Kieman was thinking, *You're a mere merchant, and yet you take breakfast like a nobleman?* but decided he was being paranoid. From the perspective of people who lived in a town that had no tradition of breakfast, he knew they found the idea of eating just after rising to be bizarre.

"Not at all—we're nearly done. What can I do for you?"

There were a limited number of reasons why Kieman would go to the trouble of visiting after sending that letter.

Given that Lawrence had not fled, it was reasonable to conclude he was going to cooperate. But from Kieman's point of view, their current location was a den of treacherous temptations, and so Lawrence was quite sure they would be taken to the south side.

Kieman stared openly across the room, and with a voice like a child pleased at being able to deliver a clever answer, replied, "Might we conduct this outside? I feel as though a mouse might appear in here at any moment."

Lawrence did not have to wonder what he meant by that.

While mice might make pleasant companions for a traveler taking a lonely meal out on the road, for those who stored goods in town, they were practically demons.

Kieman was either worried about eavesdroppers or he sincerely hated mice.

"If possible, I'd like to leave the inn. As for your things... ah, they seem to be ready."

Lawrence knew perfectly well that the "if possible" was simply for politeness's sake. He had accepted that. He was, however, a bit concerned that his bags were packed a bit too neatly there in the corner.

Whoever saw them might well catch the whiff of imminent escape about them.

"I shall await you downstairs, then." Whether or not Kieman had noticed what the bags' readiness implied, he turned on his heel and left the room.

A nobleman's arrival was pompous, and his departure was quick—and Lawrence felt as if he had just witnessed a perfect example of this.

"Hmph. He seems like something you'd loathe," said Holo.

"Doesn't he?"

Holo flicked her ears as she popped the last bite of bread into her mouth—perhaps Kieman had rubbed her the wrong way as well.

"Huh...? I thought he was sort of handsome...," said Col.

Lawrence and Holo looked at each other and then advanced upon the boy together, speaking in unison: "You mustn't grow up to be like him."

Col blinked rapidly before giving an uncertain nod.

Descending to the first floor, they found Kieman, who seemed to have been discussing something with the innkeeper.

"Now then, shall we leave through the back door and board the carriage?"

He seemed to know that Lawrence had entered the inn through the back door after receiving the letter from Eve.

Given that Lawrence had spoken of his acquaintance with Eve,

Kieman must have considered the possibility that he was spying for her. Nevertheless, he seemed to regard Lawrence as useful.

"I was unable to prepare a covered carriage—my apologies. Ah, please, do get in."

The carriage that waited alongside the inn could seat six people and was very fine indeed.

The driver was an old, bearded man with one eye, and he gave Lawrence a brief look before silently turning his gaze forward again.

It was not uncommon for sailors who had dabbled in piracy to find work in port towns after injuries or old age brought an end to their sailing careers.

The driver's left hand was missing a pinkie and ring finger, and the back of his hand was covered in scars.

He seemed usefully silent.

The carriage had seats facing both forward and backward, so Lawrence and company faced the direction of their travel while Kieman sat opposite them.

"Now, to the port," said Kieman, and the driver gave a quiet nod. The carriage began moving. "So, as to my reason for coming here this morning."

"The best trades are made in enemy territory, I assumed."

Kieman's face froze in a smile at Lawrence's interruption, and he then nodded, impressed.

He clearly did not take Lawrence seriously and was just as clearly surprised by such a reply—Lawrence was supposed to be thoroughly cowed by now.

And naturally, had Holo not been there, Lawrence would indeed have been withering.

"Ah, yes, just so. When there's trouble in the town, people like us are prohibited from crossing the river in order to prevent the trouble from escalating. Further communication is usually done

via notes attached to arrows, but this time both sides require haste. It's been decided to resolve the dispute on the delta. We young ones are just the heralds, you see. Right about now, the others are consulting with the landlords to decide upon a schedule for the proceedings."

Most likely Kieman's ilk, who so enjoyed the attention, would be gathering on the north side of town, each of them trying to take advantage of the situation in order to improve the standing of his own name or the name of his company.

The only reason Kieman himself was not there was his confidence that he was above them all and that only he possessed the means to meet with Eve.

"May I presume that the source of all this commotion is the narwhal?" Lawrence asked, at which Kieman seemed unsurprised.

Quite the contrary, he looked pleased not to have to explain the situation. "Yes, exactly. They say a narwhal's horn is even better for gout than the heart blood of a fowl. You can imagine just how much the nobility would want something like that."

"Indeed, given that gout is the punishment for gluttony, one of the Church's seven deadly sins." Lawrence was relaxed enough to even aim a few words at Holo.

He was still wary, knowing that Kieman's words could not be trusted, but the unreasoning fear he had felt earlier was gone.

"The house merchants of the nobility who live in the city will surely have sent word to their masters on fast horses. Of course, we can already list those who most want the narwhal."

"So you're prepared for battle, then?"

Kieman's eyes narrowed as he smiled. "Quite."

The carriage emerged from a narrow street onto a wide avenue that ran alongside the river.

Not so much time had passed, but large numbers of people inconvenienced by the prohibition on river crossing had begun

to appear. Lawrence wondered if the prohibition had been lifted since from the fine view of the river the avenue afforded, he could see ferries filled with people making their way across.

"Incidentally," said Kieman as the salt-scented breeze ruffled his fine blond hair, "how much did you discuss with Miss Eve?"

Lawrence got the sense that this was the threshold. He feigned an open smile. "Er, Miss Eve...?"

He could hardly fail to miss the twitch at Kieman's temple.

"Ah, I'm sorry. My mistake," said Kieman, falling silent and turning his attention to the river.

Given the region of town where Lawrence had been staying, it was obvious with whom he'd met. Kieman was trying to draw the truth out and thereby slip a leash around Lawrence's neck.

Kieman's sudden silence was because he had underestimated Lawrence.

Or perhaps he was considering a different use for Lawrence, who was cleverer than Kieman had imagined.

Lawrence spoke next, but not because he thought he could suddenly overwhelm Kieman. "Speaking of Miss Eve, I did chat with her a bit at the spring of gold."

"...Did you?" Kieman looked over at Lawrence casually. His eyes were the cold, profit-calculating eyes of a merchant who could look at another human and see only what he hoped to gain.

"She said there was nothing so troublesome as being sold something that can't be bought with money."

For the first time, Kieman looked surprised. "I'll bet," he said with a smile.

Lawrence had no intention of opposing Kieman.

The reason he insinuated Eve's being pursued by the landlord's son was to hide the true subject of their conversation, given that he could not hope to disguise that the conversation had occurred.

Now everything depended on what Kieman did. Lawrence was confident he had gotten that across.

Kieman was silent after that, which in itself was response enough.

If he had underestimated Lawrence's significance, he would have to change his plans.

They all boarded a ferry and crossed to the south side of the river.

As they waited for Kieman to pay the boatman, Holo stepped on Lawrence's foot playfully, as though reminding him not to get too full of himself.

He knew she was confident in him but did not want him to be *over*confident.

He had taken the best course of action he could think of, but his palms were still sweaty.

While on the south side the buildings were uniformly built and aligned and the paving stones clean and straight, the scenery here was very different, and for the first time Lawrence realized he was no longer on friendly ground.

"Well, shall we go?"

Led on by Kieman, Lawrence and his companions moved deeper into enemy territory.

CHAPTER SIX



"I vow not to cause any inconveniences."

They were led to a five-story inn not far from the Rowen Trade Guild. Its entrance and interior were both very familiar looking, so it was probably commonly used by members of the guild. Lawrence and company were shown to a room on the third floor, which faced the inn's courtyard.

There were no complaints about the room, and compared to the inn on the north side that Eve had recommended, the atmosphere of the place—where they would evidently be allowed to stay free of charge—was far better.

But Kieman's words could not be taken at face value.

He probably meant that he would not keep them under surveillance in a way that would cause them inconvenience.

"Should you need anything, please tell the innkeeper. And if you would be so kind as to inform us of your destination should you leave the inn, you'll avoid any unfortunate encounters."

Lawrence had expected not to be allowed to leave at all, so these words came as a surprise.

Of course, the reverse side of such graciousness was that they

were obviously confident they would be able to follow him no matter whom he tried to meet with.

And that confidence was probably justified.

Lawrence hid such thoughts behind his merchant's mask and answered with a simple "Understood."

"Well, then, please be at ease and enjoy your stay," said Kieman with a smile; then he turned before anyone could reply and closed the door behind him.

Lawrence, taken aback, stared at the door for a few moments.

He had assumed that Kieman would explain what role he expected Lawrence to play in his view and Eve's, but instead the issue had been completely evaded.

"... What was that all about?" Lawrence scratched his head and sighed and then noticed that Holo was rolling happily around on the bed. Meanwhile, Col had his hand on that same bed and a look of surprise on his face.

"What are you doing?" Lawrence asked, and Col turned to him, eyes shining.

"Cotton! It's filled with cotton!"

"Cotton?"

"Come, lie upon it yourself! 'Tis soft, like a cloud."

If the beds used cotton, then the room would have cost quite a bit if Lawrence had been paying for it himself.

Given Kieman's enthusiasm and the basic principles of return on investment, it meant that he expected to use Lawrence in a way that would earn him more than this room was costing.

The size of this exchange was becoming more and more concrete.

Now that it had been pointed out, Lawrence noticed that the room itself was quite fine. He approached the window and saw that its joints were very tight so as to block drafts. When he

opened it, he could look down onto a lovely courtyard where many flowers bloomed despite the season.

"..."

Given all this, the food served at this inn would likely be quite luxurious as well.

Lawrence was not unfamiliar with such methods. If one compensated someone only as well as his station demanded, he would do only what was expected of them. But if he were showered with overwhelming generosity, his embarrassment would make him easy to control, and this would force him to put forward extraordinary effort.

The fear that Lawrence had bottled up began to creep back into his view.

At the very least, should he have asked Kieman for an explanation?

He mulled it over as he turned his gaze back into the room from the courtyard, when—

"Fool," said Holo, startling Lawrence so thoroughly he nearly fell out of the window.

"Wh-what—"

"That's what I should be asking you! What are you doing with that serious expression of yours? You're staying here in a room far beyond your purse's means to let, yet you cannot enjoy it?" demanded Holo, sounding annoyed.

Behind her, Col looked on nervously as he sat on the cotton-stuffed bed.

"Well, I..."

Lawrence stumbled over his words, and Holo stabbed her index finger at his chest, continuing to talk.

"You truly are a weakling when it comes to such things. Why do you think that nasty little whelp left you here without explaining

anything? There won't be anything like last night's eavesdropper, either. Our whelp is a bit more interesting than that."

Holo turned to the door, continuing to show her fangs.

"If the explanation you gave me is correct, he's still mistrustful of you. And 'tis a fact you've a connection to that vixen. So what does it mean that he's brought you to his territory and is trying to make you one of his pawns? Naturally, he must make sure you haven't any strings attached."

It all made perfect sense, but none of it explained why there had been no explanation of any sort. "Is it just that he didn't explain anything because he can't trust me?" Lawrence asked, which made Holo smile an unfriendly smile.

That was not the answer.

His punishment was having his beard yanked.

"At the very least, you've been brought to the territory of one you cannot be sure is friend or foe, and you have been left to your own devices—so what would you normally do? Aren't you in the habit of gathering information when you arrive in a new town?"

Still behind Holo, Col listened to her lecture, fascinated.

That had to be why she was doing this—if he did not want to be humiliated in front of Col, he was going to have to think hard and fast.

He did.

But nothing was coming to mind.

As he stammered, the wisewolf released his beard and crossed her arms, continuing on.

"On that count, humans and wolves are no different. You seek the counsel of those you know or those you trust. In other words, you navigate unfamiliar territory using the map within your mind. The minds of humans and beasts cannot be seen, but when they move, those movements make it quite clear what sort of map they possess. Just like my ears and tail or your beard."

The beard part was a joke, but he could not help stroking it in thought.

"So in essence—" Holo said.

If he could not come up with an answer here, he was quite sure that Holo would take Col in hand and head straight for Yoitsu.

In the hairsbreadth gap Holo had left after her words, Lawrence slid in and took the opportunity. "He's trying to see what I'll do when put in an uncertain situation."

"..."

Holo fell silent for a moment, perhaps having swallowed her rebuke at his slowness to answer. "Quite... Honestly, the only reason to put us all up in such a fine room is—"

"—To make us sweat."

Holo's shoulders slackened, and she flicked her ears and looked over her shoulder.

Col, every bit the serious student, gave a slow, wide-eyed nod.

"So, what then shall we do?"

Col was momentarily stunned into silence by the sudden question.

He immediately and furiously started thinking of how to answer, while Holo's wagging tale made it clear she expected Lawrence to speak up.

It was like tossing a bone in front of a dog.

Even though he knew he was being baited, he could not help it.

She had two males in the palm of her hand and was making them vie with each other for the sheer fun of it.

"We should act as usual and enjoy the fine treatment." Lawrence's words were just an instant quicker—although worryingly, Col had opened his mouth and appeared nearly ready to answer himself.

Holo looked at Col for a moment, then slowly turned back to regard Lawrence, a smile dancing about the corners of her mouth as if to say, "Not bad."

"If we truly mean to support Kieman through and through, then this isn't enemy territory—it's our home base, and there's nothing to fear," he continued. Holo nodded with satisfaction, her ears flicking, as though she had found the treasure for which she had been searching.

Lawrence looked past Holo to Col and asked, "Was that what you were going to say?" which made the boy smile, nodding with only a touch of sheepishness.

"Also, what would you do if the person on whom you'd lain an important duty seemed about to fall under the weight? Could you calmly continue to let them labor, eh?" Holo prodded.

Thus far, Lawrence had always bought and sold on his own, bearing every risk and worry himself, so the matter had never really occurred to him. The very notion of using someone else was so far from his mind that such thoughts were immediately abandoned.

As long as it was within his reach, Lawrence was more or less confident in his ability to fight. But there were those in the world who used spears longer than their arms—to say nothing of bows and arrows. And battles were won by generals who never even had to lay hands upon a sword.

Holo had long been such a leader.

"When I did such things myself, I nary used such roundabout, bothersome methods." She grinned, flashing her pure white fangs. "I am Holo. Holo the Wisewolf of Yoitsu!" she said, hands on her hips, chest flung proudly out.

It had been some time since she had bragged like this, but to be boastful and proud was indeed very Holo-like. And given the admiration with which Col was gazing at her, it was surely just what was called for—since if she were *too* wise a wolf, she would not be able to indulge in this childish boasting.

"Now then. What do you suggest we do?"

Here was Holo's true aim.

Lawrence found the words drawn out of him. "We go out and enjoy ourselves."

"Mm. As grandly as we may, too." Holo glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, as if making sure he understood the meaning behind her words.

It was perhaps a bit pathological of Lawrence to then decide to pretend not to notice this. "In that case, let's go see the narwhal at the church, shall we?"

He spoke in a jesting fashion as if to emphasize that it was *his* proposal.

Col looked a bit taken aback, though Holo's surprise was feigned.

She truly was a genius at turning circumstances to her own advantage.

"After all, there was quite a crowd on the way over here. If we ask, I'll bet we'll be allowed to see it."

Lawrence doubted that going to see the narwhal would be seen as a sign of betrayal, regardless of his connection to Eve. If he were truly thinking of betraying Kieman, then there would be no reason to take actions that would attract the guild's attention.

Of course, this was all hypothetical—it was possible to imagine any number of layers of hidden motivations.

"What do you say? Wouldn't it be boring to just go out for food and drink?"

Holo was a proud wisewolf, and Lawrence's proposal was meant to be worthy of her position; yet its form still contained a certain childish innocence—two opposing aspects.

As a wisewolf, Holo had the confidence to stand before the narwhal. Yet like a child, she was surely interested in just seeing it.

At least, that was the idea.

Judging by her delight, he seemed to have hit the bull's-eye.

"'Tis not a bad notion, coming from you."

From Holo's lashing tongue, such a statement was like getting full marks on a test.

Col stood from the bed and busily began preparing to leave.

They were a strange trio, but here and now, Lawrence could scarcely imagine anything more comforting.

As expected, when they informed the innkeeper that they wished to view the narwhal, he told them to simply mention Kieman's name at the church.

Kieman had unquestionably expected this.

Lawrence did not care enough to ask Holo to be certain, but once they left the inn, they would probably have several people tailing them.

The church faced a prominent avenue on the south side of Kerube and was the grandest building there.

Unlike the buildings on the north side, the architecture of the south had a fixed height and build so as not to stand out or be excessively showy—and among such buildings, the church's beauty and grandeur was impressive indeed.

Its tower rose high above any other building, and its top housed a bell polished to shine so brightly that it was easily visible even from the ground below. The grand gate that faced the avenue had thick wooden doors that must have required great effort to open and close and was reinforced with countless iron bands. It could surely repel even the largest army of demons.

The building itself was made from large stones, with a passage from scriptures carved atop the entrance. A benevolent angel looked down on all who passed through.

It was a profound sight.

If one ventured deep enough into the forest, one might see a great tree that seemed tall enough to reach to the heavens. Such

trees were usually the holy residences of local gods or spirits, and standing before one was an awe-inspiring experience.

But before them now was not some great tree tended by some unfathomable power, but rather a church built by human hands on human land.

And within it was not some sharp-fanged god but a benevolent God in human form.

It was true that in comparison to this, the pagans who prayed at waterfalls and springs, worshipped toads, and feared the cries of beasts as the words of the gods seemed worryingly barbaric.

Even with a wisewolf standing right there beside him, Lawrence could not help but think so.

If he had not found himself being dragged along by the ear by an irritated Holo, Lawrence would have continued to stand there dumbstruck.

"Come, let us hurry in."

A throng had gathered in front of the church, and listening to them, the group could tell they were abuzz with talk of the narwhal. It seemed the news had gotten out—indeed, no door could contain a wagging tongue.

But between the assemblage and their goal of paying their respects to the narwhal stood guards armed with spears.

Lawrence and Col found themselves dragged as far as the entrance by Holo, but where they would begin to ascend the stairs that led to the church, they were stopped by the guards.

"The church is currently conducting official business. None may enter."

Influence was a strange, invisible power indeed.

"We are from the Rowen Trade Guild. We've permission from Mr. Kieman."

At those words, the guards exchanged a glance, understanding

that trouble would arise if they turned Lawrence away. Reluctantly, they lowered their spears and beckoned entry.

"My thanks," said Lawrence with a smile, pulling the still-irritated Holo along as he entered the church.

Col seemed rather nervous and clutched the sleeve of Holo's robe as he followed along.

"It's quiet."

Though it was a church, being built at this scale made it feel more like a castle.

And while mountain castles were small, dark, shabby affairs with sheep and pigs wandering about the keep, this was a proper city castle.

Passing through the entrance, they saw a round ceiling painted with a colorful scene from the scriptures, and columns carved in the forms of strange mythological creatures made it clear this place was not of the secular world.

There were few windows and so many candles—expensive beeswax candles that gave off little smoke in order to avoid damaging the paintings with soot.

Lawrence looked back and saw the crowd outside straining to see past the guards, who still blocked the entrance.

If they received special treatment like this all the time, it was little wonder that the Church elite were so high and mighty.

"It must be farther in," said Holo, her nose twitching.

No matter how grand its construction, every church shared the same basic plan.

The sanctuary should lie straight ahead, and any holy or special objects would be beneath or behind the altar.

Before Lawrence could say anything, Holo forged ahead. Her footsteps made it seem as though she were being beckoned by something. Then, the moment she reached her hand out to the open, intricately carved door to the sanctuary—

"Who goes there?" a high voice rang out, and even Holo flinched in surprise.

But it wasn't like Holo to be caught unawares. She had simply been very, very focused on what lay ahead—the legendary beast whose flesh granted long life and which she had long ago chased herself.

"Who goes there? Guards!"

It was a tall, thin man with a high nose wearing a cream-colored robe.

A glance at his nervous face would have made it clear to anyone that he was a man of the Church, and his high voice sounded like a strangling chicken.

"My humble apologies. We were referred here by Lud Kieman of the Rowen Trade Guild." Lawrence made sure to mention Kieman's name before speaking his own. "There seems to have been some mistake."

No organization was as preoccupied with rules and regulations as the Church. But human connections superseded written rules.

"What? The Rowen...? Ah, excuse me." The man calmed himself as quickly as he had angered and waved off the guards that approached from the hall.

The guards from the entrance barely seemed to notice. Perhaps this sort of thing happened often.

"Ahem. I am the assistant priest of this church, Sean Natole."

"I am Kraft Lawrence of the Rowen Trade Guild."

"I'm Holo."

"I am Tote Col."

Holo had introduced herself with her attention still on what lay past the door, while Col was carefully polite.

A merchant, a girl dressed like a nun, and a boy in tattered clothes—it was a strange combination, but to someone who had lived nearly his entire life within the Church, almost anything from the secular world was strange.

The priest did not seem particularly mystified.

"Is that so? Have you come here to pray, then?"

When it came to speaking their minds, clergymen were second to none.

Lawrence quietly cleared his throat. "No, we came here in hopes of being allowed to view the narwhal..."

"Ah..." The assistant priest, who had introduced himself as Natole, looked them over appraisingly, undoubtedly trying to guess how much of a tithe they would leave. "Even having stated your goal," continued Natole, cutting off Lawrence's attempt to respond, "we have yet to determine whether the thing, which has been brought to this church, is good or evil. While it is true that God has made everything that is, this particular creature is so strange that the head priest is currently seeking God's aid in determining its nature. While an introduction from Mr. Kieman of the Rowen Trade Guild is no small thing..."

The assistant priest seemed to be accustomed to rambling at length, but Holo's patience was at its end.

Having no other choice, Lawrence smiled and approached Natole, reaching inside his coat as he did so. "Actually, Mr. Kieman instructed me to give his regards to Father Natole, God's faithful servant." He then took Natole's hand, and in the same motion, he passed the priest a note.

"...Be assured that the message is received," said Natole casually, clearing his throat again. "The creature in question is currently being identified in the sanctuary, but I suppose I could allow you to view it."

"You have my sincere gratitude," said Lawrence by way of exaggerated thanks.

Natole nodded, not at all displeased, then approached the door by which Holo still stood, unbarring and opening it.

"As my holy walk is yet incomplete, I am prohibited from

gazing upon it myself." Translation: He was too afraid of anything pagan to look at it. Either that, or he hesitated to enter the sanctuary immediately after having taken a bribe.

Regardless, Lawrence followed Holo into the sanctuary, a wry smile on his face.

The smile was not because of the disagreeable priest, though. It was aimed at Holo, who had been so eager to get past the door while it was closed but now hesitated when it was open.

"Go on," urged Lawrence quietly, pushing her from behind.

If she had tried to find the narwhal long ago, that meant there must have been someone to whom she wanted to feed its meat.

Was it the villager she had met in Pasloe during the centuries she spent there? Or was it someone else, someone whom she had met on her travels?

But she had failed to obtain the meat, and whoever she had wanted to give it to had died.

Had she been there when they died? Or had they passed away while she was traveling? Lawrence did not know, but he was quite certain she had not said good-bye with a smile.

But perhaps her friend had.

And now Holo was faced with it again, hence her expression.

"... This is...," murmured Col.

A stone walkway led straight ahead into a room filled with hundreds and hundreds of long, wooden pews.

Atop the walkway rested a faded carpet as if leading to the very heavens themselves.

At the end of the path, set in the high far wall, was a giant stained-glass depiction of God flanked by angels singing His praises.

And beneath that stood an altar where God's representative would stand and lead the congregation, and beneath *that* was a large casket.

They were still far away but could catch glimpses of the strange form within.

The large casket seemed to be filled with water, and the living legend within it shifted as if having noticed them, causing the water to slosh.

At the same time, there came the knocking sound of the creature's horn upon the wood of the container.

"It's really there."

None of the three of them could take another step.

Curiosity killed the cat, but a merchant's curiosity could kill the gods.

Nevertheless, it was hard to approach.

Lawrence felt as if he understood how the legend that eating the creature's flesh granted long life had gotten its start.

"Shall we get closer?"

Lawrence placed his hand on Holo's shoulder, and she looked up at him in surprise.

"..."

She then shook her head wordlessly, turning forward again.

As she stood there blankly gazing at the narwhal, it seemed as if she was saying good-bye to her past.

"I-is that a god, too?" inquired Col in a small voice. He had been holding on to Holo's sleeve the entire time and at some point had grabbed ahold of Lawrence's coat as well.

"I wonder. What do you think?" Lawrence asked, handing the question over to Holo, who seemed extremely irritated by it.

Perhaps she did not want such questions to be posed to her, but who else was there who could answer them?

"At the very least, it is within the realm of normal animals. Anything beyond that has a special scent. But I do not sense that here."

Col and Lawrence sniffed deliberately, and Holo turned to face them, a lonely look in her eyes. Col seemed to understand

her meaning and hurried to come up with something to say but failed to find the words.

Lawrence put his hand on the boy's head. "Just a bad joke," he said, looking at Holo, who turned away without a hint of self-reflection about her.

"Well, if that's how big it is and this is the extent of the guards they've posted...," mused Holo in a still softer voice as she looked around the room.

Evidently her proposal to simply take the narwhal and escape—what she'd originally encouraged Lawrence to do—had not been entirely academic.

"Wasn't that just a hypothetical plan?"

Holo smiled maliciously and cocked her head. "If your fear could always be curbed by hypothetical notions, 'twould make things easier for me."

"..."

It was true there was nothing wrong with knowing they could steal the narwhal whenever they wanted.

"The problem is from whence to enter."

"What about breaking through the front door?"

"It could be difficult if that door were shut tight."

Lawrence thought back to those iron-reinforced doors.

In point of fact, the church housed many valuable items, and during wartime, it would be the first place attacked and the last where townspeople could make their stand.

The front entrance had surely been constructed to withstand siege weapons.

Even for Holo, it would be difficult to breach.

"What about through that?" Col pointed to the stained-glass window positioned above the narwhal. A wall of colored glass.

It was constructed to let in light, but given Holo's great size, she would need an entrance about as large.



"We'd be cursed for trying," said Lawrence, which made Holo's throat rumble in amusement.

"Heh-heh. It might feel rather nice to smash through that and leap in here."

Terrifyingly, there was no hint of jest in her voice.

"That might be the only way in, but that glass is built that way so as to keep the wall from collapsing. If we just destroy it, we could be in real trouble."

"Hmm?" Holo and Col, who had been giggling conspiratorially, looked up in unison.

"When a building gets this large, you can't just make it entirely out of stone. The weight is too much, and the structure can't hold itself up; it'll collapse. So you make part of it out of glass, which is lighter, to avoid that. If you look carefully, you can see the iron rods supporting the joists. If we break those, things could get bad."

The fact that all sanctuaries had stained-glass windows out of sheer necessity was rather disappointing—it felt somehow sad that even the Church's buildings were not exempt from the rules of the world.

"We shall worry about that when the time comes," said Holo, sighing impatiently before continuing on. "If you would work a bit harder, I'd not have to bear so much of the danger."

It was true.

Lawrence could only look away in shame. Col smiled slightly and said, "I know you can do it, Mr. Lawrence," which Holo found amusing.

"Well, let's hurry back. Father Natole will get suspicious."

"Mm."

"All right!"

The two answered simultaneously, but Lawrence, worried, put

the question to them again. "Do you really not want to have a closer look?"

"I'm fine," said Col, looking a touch scared.

A troubled Holo replied, "I care not."

Both of them seemed frightened in more ways than one.

And even Lawrence felt something that made it hard to approach the strange, one-horned beast.

He could not say that he did not understand why Natole would have begged off entering the sanctuary. The narwhal was a creature spoken of only in myths that proclaimed that its flesh granted long life and that medicine made from its horn cured disease. But here it was, real. And one thing was certain—the legends were well deserved.

They would have to prepare themselves.

But now that they knew Holo was capable of breaching the church, she would never let Lawrence turn tail.

They expressed their thanks to Natole, and once he had closed the doors of the church behind him, Lawrence could not help but speak up.

"It certainly had an aura befitting the legends. No wonder it's captured the minds of so many people."

Natole closed the door's bar with a loud *clunk* and then turned around with his face full of fright. "It's a terrifying thing, truly."

There was no question that the narwhal's presence put the Church in a bad position.

The people of the Church claimed God as their ally and were thus feared by many. But there were surely people in the world who did not fear God.

Turning a living legend like the narwhal into money meant treating it no differently than the many other goods in which they traded.

To have sufficient nerve to do such a thing, it was as if they lived in another world.

Once they were back on the crowded avenue, Lawrence finally felt able to take a deep breath.

"Still," Lawrence said, standing proudly and looking at Holo next to him. "I suppose I've used you to bargain with myself."

Given that she was unable to actually read minds, Holo probably would not see the connection Lawrence's words were drawing. But the wisewolf appeared to quickly grasp the conflict to which Lawrence was alluding. She grinned despite Col's wide-eyed surprise at the confession that Lawrence had put Holo in hock.

"So we've naught to fear, do we?" she said, moving her body closer as they passed through the crowds. She slipped her hand into his, and indeed, there was nothing more fear inspiring than that.

Lawrence smiled, looking at Col with a sigh. "Looks like our wisewolf speaks the truth."

Col nodded, looked back and forth between Holo and Lawrence and—amusingly—nodded again.

It was evening when Kieman again came knocking at their door, and Lawrence and company were in the middle of dinner.

Just as expected, the meal the inn had provided was a grand one, and Holo was properly joyous while Col occasionally choked on his food.

But the fact that Kieman called upon them in the evening was proof that he did not consider them mere fools—because the best time to approach a troublesome opponent is either to wake them up or to interrupt their meal.

"Would you care to join us?" offered Lawrence as he brushed

bread crumbs off his hands. Kieman raised both hands with a smile.

"I'll pass," he answered. "If possible, I'd like to speak with you outside, Mr. Lawrence."

Lawrence had no intention of refusing such an offer.

He gave Col and Holo a look, then stood and went with Kieman into the hallway.

Simply having Col there so Holo was not alone during her meal was a big help, although if Lawrence was to tell her that, she would give him quite a look indeed.

"So, about the topic at hand," began Kieman as soon as they had entered another room. Lawrence initially wondered if it was a storage room, but it seemed that it was a space Kieman had reserved for private contemplation. It was candlelit, and there were stacks of rolled-up maps, all of which were lettered in writing Lawrence had never seen before.

"We wish to ask you, Mr. Lawrence, to act as our messenger."

Was he using the first-person plural simply to intimidate, or were there actually multiple parties?

Lawrence decided to conduct his negotiations standing, like a proper traveling merchant would. "Might I ask the reason for that?"

"Naturally. To be blunt, originally this duty was not yours."

Of course it wasn't.

"Initially we'd intended to use Ted Reynolds, master of the Jean Company—you're familiar with it, yes?—to convey our intentions. The reason was—"

"—He wanted to escape the manipulations of the north."

Kieman nodded and continued. "He contacted us, and using him would allow us to profit in the copper trade. So he was our first choice. Moreover, his connections to the Bolan family are

quite strong. He controls the whole import-export trade of it on the Roam River, probably given his ties with the wolf."

Lawrence immediately remembered the salt trade.

If the Jean Company was shipping copper coins to the Winfiel kingdom, it would not be surprising if he was receiving salt statues in return. In which case, there was another way to interpret Reynolds's nervous visit the previous night. He had been worrying about the source of his greatest profit.

Quite likely he expected Kieman and the others on the south side to call on him, but he had been mistaken. And when he asked why, he would have soon realized that they had found a more convenient individual. He must have been trying to play the conflict between the north and south to his own coin purse's advantage. If so, it was possible that his shameful, nervous act the previous night had just been part of his plan.

The sad shape of his receding form was likely proof of how pathetic he found himself for resorting to such ploys.

"Our goal is this: By using the narwhal, we wish to gain full ownership of the northern district."

"But without allowing them to use the resulting profit to then control the entire town."

Kieman nodded.

It seemed he was thinking of something very similar to what Eve had proposed.

But that did not mean that Eve was particularly incredible or that Kieman's imagination was lacking.

In circumstances when one could not absolutely trust one's partner but still had to sit down at the table and negotiate with them, following such a plan was the most reasonable course of action.

Given that, Lawrence finally felt he understood why Eve had called on him.

In this particular situation, someone who did not understand the links between the north and south side would be unsuitable.

The only way the two parties could negotiate on an equal level was if their mediator was equally likely to betray either side. After that, it was simply a fight to sway that mediator.

"A man in one of the northern landlord families is infatuated with the head of the Bolan house. We must use this. So long as the head of the Bolan family does not betray us, we can ensure a good outcome both for her and ourselves... but we do not know how this will play out yet."

Lawrence was well aware that Eve's situation was a complicated one. There was no telling what she might employ. She was like an alchemist's kettle.

"The messenger might well be our ally or, depending on circumstances, could change his allegiance to the other side. That is the sort of person we need. Otherwise, the wolf of the Roam River will be too cautious to approach us. Of course, we must ensure that we ultimately triumph, so our strategy must be a foolproof one... and sadly, the goods in question are easily spoiled."

It was a living narwhal, after all.

"What do you want me to do specifically?"

Kieman cleared his throat. He closed his eyes as if reviewing the entire plan.

"We literally wish you to convey messages for us. We do not trust her, nor does the wolf trust us. But we trust you, and she does as well. You need only bring our proposal to them: The condition of the narwhal. The price. The method of delivery. The time. Or possibly the contingencies for escape. You'll carry that information to them and then bring their replies back to us."

"And the profit?"

Kieman grinned, his canines strangely prominent behind his thin lips. "I'd like this to result in the Rowen Trade Guild

becoming the preeminent guild on the south side. The current guild house chief, Jeeta, has become complacent—I'll replace him. And the resulting profit..." He paused for effect like an actor. "...I'll leave that to your imagination."

Instead of hauling goods by himself, selling them in person with his own words, that work was left to others and the profits simply piled up in the ledger.

It was like another world. A transformation from merchant to something completely different.

In receiving a small share of that, the profit that would fall from the sky would be astounding.

"Of course, this is a mere verbal promise, which means the wolf has a chance to sway you to her side."

"Indeed. And she could offer me concrete profit, no doubt."

That is, she was able to swindle everyone so spectacularly that she gained the narwhal for herself. Eve, the former noblewoman, could then sell it off to the highest bidder. It was quite possible that she would then be able to offer him a sea of gold coins as compensation.

"I'd prefer not to have to deal with the wolf, but without doing so, there's no chance for success at all. She's simply that powerful."

Kieman's words were heavy with meaning.

It was already clear that the landlord's son who was so infatuated with Eve would not betray his family solely for his own gain. But if it was for Eve, that was another story.

Excuses were very powerful things.

And when the reason was love, even a dwarf could defeat a dragon.

"Understood, then. I believe I see my role in all of this." Lawrence smiled, and Kieman returned the expression.

An exchange of smiles signified the conclusion of a secret deal.

It was so in all the legends of clandestine, nervous dealings—bearded merchants snickering to each other over their successes.

"I'm glad to hear that. However..."

"However?" asked Lawrence, which made Kieman smile like a guileless boy.

"However, I truly thought I'd had you completely under my control. How... how did you regain your footing?"

At these words, Lawrence smiled and looked at the floor.

It was true, after all.

At the branch office on the delta, Lawrence had been completely trapped by Kieman—utterly and perfectly, like a puppet.

And yet after only a short time, the puppet had regained its soul. No wonder the puppet master was surprised.

Of course, Kieman himself ought to have some notion as to why.

So seeing Lawrence smile silently, Kieman spoke. "I apologize for asking such a foolish question. Neither merchants, knights, nor kings can accomplish so very much on their own. Priests are no different."

Lawrence understood merchants, knights, and kings—but not priests. Every great merchant, knight, or king had a great lover to become his wife and support him.

But what of priests?

"They have their God," Lawrence could not help murmuring to himself past his smile.

So with Holo supporting him, how far would he be able to go?

"Well, we're both walking on thin ice made solid only with lies—so let us each do our best, eh?" Still sitting, Kieman extended his hand.

Lawrence took it and gripped it with obvious force.

"Now then, I can't very well do side dealings all day. If you need to contact me, simply speak to the innkeeper. Also, we won't do

anything so tasteless as eavesdropping on you, so if you'd be so kind to return the favor."

"Indeed. Doubt and misunderstanding lead always to misfortune."

Kieman nodded and stood.

Unlike their initial meeting in his office, he escorted Lawrence out of the room. "This should all be settled by the evening after tomorrow."

He hid the word *desperately* behind a sly smile.

"In that case even if we can't sleep from nerves, we should be able to see it through," said Lawrence, which made Kieman smile, and he began to walk.

His footsteps were easy and casual, and if someone had happened to chance upon that hallway, he would never have suspected that Kieman and Lawrence knew each other.

Alone in the hallway, Lawrence smiled wryly. "He didn't say a thing about what'll happen if we fail," he murmured.

He himself had done something similar in the Church city of Ruvinheigen—swindling a poor shepherdess by speaking only of the possible profits.

Back then he had felt nearly crushed with guilt for this. But what of it?

Kieman had acted as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Lawrence had no confidence that he could be or act like that.

Thanks to Holo, he had a way to recover if the situation became truly untenable.

But that was absolutely a method of last resort for the sake of his own reassurance. What she really wanted was for him to extract his own share out of these dealings, not just complete his tasks safely.

Could he truly outwit such opponents?

He had no choice but to try, and having come this far, he rather wanted to.

Lawrence scratched his forehead and began to walk.

In the darkness, he bared his teeth in a smile.

He felt like reading an epic.

CHAPTER SEVEN



That evening, Lawrence was unable to sleep and not just because he had declared that it might be so.

Kieman would likely pass the night immersed in planning and preparation, but Lawrence had to worry about executing those plans.

He knew he was not particularly skilled.

Nearly any merchant would be seeking more information to try and gain the upper hand. But this time, Lawrence had to stay passive. And outwitting his opponent under such constraints required significant ability.

He had only a small amount of time during which to formulate a plan, and his information was limited. It was not even clear whether he would be able to protect his own position.

Without Holo, he would have unquestionably chosen self-preservation and acted as Kieman's pawn. In which case, he would most likely have been used and then abandoned.

Lawrence smiled self-deprecatingly and rolled over.

His bed was next to the cold windowsill, so if he lifted his head up a bit, he could see the faint blue moonlight slipping through the gaps in the window.

Lawrence realized how great the distance was between his

own ability as a merchant and Eve's; he had to doff his hat to her. Against her, a man like Kieman was putting forth his greatest effort. And Lawrence had jumped into the middle of their battle.

Lawrence rolled over again and sighed.

He had no intention of turning back now, but he was still nervous. The more he willed himself to sleep, the more his eyes stubbornly remained open.

Smiling wryly to himself, Lawrence got out of bed, compelled by thirst, and he decided to feel a bit of the night breeze.

Owing to the chilly air, the copper water jug was cold, almost like ice. Swirling it gently, he walked through the silent inn.

The inn was built around an enclosed courtyard, and in the courtyard was a well. Farther south, most buildings were constructed along such lines. Naturally it was easy enough to differentiate between the buildings of different trading companies, but the basic layout was the same. This was not because people everywhere had somehow decided on it, but rather because the carpenters and masons that did the construction tended to travel around from work site to work site.

Before his travels had taken him far abroad, Lawrence had assumed that such buildings were common the world over. He could still remember the shock he first felt when he discovered this was not the case. The farther he ranged, the more he realized how narrow his preconceived notions had been. As the years passed, he came to realize how large and complicated the world was and how small he was by comparison. There were infinities above him and infinities below.

Someone else could always do what he could do, and no matter what he might think of, someone else had realized it sooner. There in the pale blue moonlight, Lawrence lowered the well bucket down into the skyward-facing mouth of the well.

Things did not generally go the way one would hope, and usually they were decided by surrounding circumstances.

Lawrence had become involved with Eve while in the process of collecting information about the wolf bones, but the real beginning had been their encounter in Lenos. And the reason they had arrived in Lenos was none other than Holo.

Lawrence was certain he was swimming toward his goal, but he was not in a pond; he was in a swiftly flowing river.

He pulled the bucket up and looked at the moon's reflection in the water within.

He wondered if it was a consequence of his dislike at being nothing but a minor character in the story he currently faced that made him think back to the delicate time when he had been just starting out as a merchant.

If Lawrence were a historian, he would not be able to categorize himself as the pivotal character in this. No, that would be Kieman—or Eve, perhaps.

He smiled ruefully at the thought, and the moon's reflection in the bucket distorted even as his face did.

Deciding this was all too silly, he looked up, and there was Holo. Somehow, he had expected her.

"'Tis a lovely night, is it not?"

Her hands were clasped behind her back, and she smiled as sweetly as a town girl on a sunny day.

Lawrence returned the smile and agreed. "It is."

"As the moon waxes and wanes, so too does my mood," said Holo, dipping her finger into the bucket, her breath coming out in faint white puffs. "You left the room so suggestively, I couldn't help but follow."

"Did I look so desperate to be spoken to?"

In place of a reply, Holo grinned.

"...I suppose I did." It was surely progress for him to be able to gracefully surrender.

"Still," said Holo, picking up the pitcher he had left at the edge of the well and playing with it in both hands. "I did want to speak with you a bit."

"With me?"

"Aye."

"Are you going to teach me some secret technique for controlling human nature?" Lawrence asked, which made Holo chuckle quietly. She then sat at the edge of the well, still holding the cold pitcher.

"If it were so, I'd have no need to tell you. After all, I've been controlling *your* nature for quite some time, have I not? You should know how to do it yourself by now."

"I suppose you want me to answer, 'I guess you're right.'"

"There's a fine attitude."

Holo smiled, revealing her fangs, and the smile then receded like a tide rolling out.

She was a wolf of many faces. Like the waves of the sea when viewed from afar, there was no way of telling whether dangerous rocks lay beneath the surface. When the tide receded and the truth was revealed, there was no telling what extraordinary things could happen. Lawrence teasingly stroked her head, wondering how many times he had nearly been sunk on those rocks.

"I..."

"Hmm?"

"I...I am regretting having pushed you into this."

Lawrence sat beside Holo.

She clutched the copper pitcher as if it were warming her, though it was probably even colder than the water.

"Well, I'm grateful. It's thanks to you that I can stand up to Kieman."

That was no lie. And yet Holo's ears moved busily as though trying to ascertain the truth of the words. Finally she looked down and nodded.

"That is what I regret."

"It is? Well...I suppose you should have let it go unsaid, then..."

"That is not what I mean." Holo shook her head and took a deep breath.

She then looked straight at Lawrence and continued speaking.

"One as clever as you can accomplish nearly anything so long as he has clear knowledge of his surroundings. But everyone has their strengths and weaknesses. I urged you on, despite knowing that what lay ahead was not something you were suited for. I knew it wasn't something you wished for."

It was true that Lawrence was heading straight into a conflict among town merchants, all of them very skilled and cunning.

But if he were to open a shop in a town somewhere, that would be the world he faced, so this did not seem like something with which Holo should be concerned.

Before he could say so, though, Holo headed him off.

"In any case, if you'd had the backbone to cross swords with them, you would've already been using my abilities to their fullest extent."

Surely Eve or Kieman would have done so.

They would have used Holo right from the start. From a logical perspective, she was the strongest weapon.

"You seem to wish for a steady, reliable course of events, and I can see that it suits you. But what I pushed you into is the precise opposite of that. Is it not so?"

It was so.

One needed only to look back on Lawrence's profits prior to meeting Holo to see. They gradually rose, and to that extent he

was satisfied with the steady business he had been doing. Why did he want to have a shop in the first place? It was hardly as if he wanted to hold the world in the palm of his hands. It was nothing so grandiose—he simply wanted to be part of a smaller world, a town, and to have a place in that town.

"Still," Lawrence said, "Still, it hurts a bit to hear that you don't consider me suited to such things."

Holo's ears flicked beneath her hood. She slowly looked up. "But you aren't, are you?"

"When you say it so plainly, I can't seem to be angry at you." Lawrence gave a pained smile.

But as he looked up, his breath rose into the sky toward the moon, and the pain in that smile seemed to go with it, dissipating like so much smoke.

"But I'm not going to drop out of this story," he declared.

When Lawrence looked back down, he saw Holo making a face as if she had breathed in some of the bitterness he had exhaled.

"Especially when you make faces like that."

"Ugh..." She didn't try to hide her anxiety when he poked her forehead.

To look at her, Holo honestly seemed to regret having pushed him in this direction. While every time they encountered some incident or another she would joke that she would be in trouble if he turned out to be a clumsy merchant, Holo did seem to be genuinely worried about him.

But Lawrence got the feeling that it was not just because he was not well suited to this particular problem.

"If you're this regretful, it must mean you're expecting me to encounter something extraordinary."

Holo hated it when Lawrence agonized alone and drew his own conclusions, but the truth was she did precisely the same thing.

However, the clever Holo seemed to think silence was more effective than raising her voice to point that out.

"It seems as though you've plans to write about your travels with me."

"Huh?" He did remember saying something like that but failed to see any connection.

Holo glared at him a bit angrily, evidently expecting him to understand. But perhaps deciding that Lawrence was at the limits of his intellect, she pouted and continued.

"And if so, wouldn't that make you the protagonist? I wanted my protagonist to act like one. At least... at least if I'm to be but a side character."

In the tale of the destruction of her homelands by the Moon-Hunting Bear, Holo was not even a side character—she was out of the story entirely.

As she sat at the edge of the well, Holo's dangling legs made her seem very childlike indeed. And it was true, the wish to be a main character in the story of the world was a very childish one.

"But that is truly naught but my own selfishness. Should that desire put you in harm's way or cause you to wander so sadly out into a courtyard at night like this, it pains me," admitted Holo, putting a hand to her chest and wincing in apparent pain.

Lawrence pinched her right cheek lightly and replied, "I do see what you're trying to say, but..." As Holo rubbed her tweaked cheek in irritation, he had no choice but to strengthen his tone and continue. "The more you say such things, the more unable I am to back down."

This was because she had expectations of him.

When Holo had expectations of Lawrence, he had to live up to those expectations.

"Aye, and 'tis why I did not wish to tell you..."

"Because I'd be stubborn?" he shot back, grinning and earning a punch to his ribs.

Holo then regarded him with a look so serious it could hardly be a joke. "Surely you understand how costly 'twould be to ignore my care."

"..."

He was fully aware, and Holo saying as much amounted to her telling him she had high expectations.

Lawrence paused for an appropriate interval before nodding firmly. Naturally he took this very seriously.

But Holo regarded him dubiously. "Do you truly understand?"

"I believe I do."

"Truly?"

At her excessive persistence, he finally realized.

If she wished for him to be the protagonist of this story, what did that make her? If she could get everything she wanted by simply wishing and worrying, it was quite a role indeed.

The problem was that all through the ages, men had been weak against such opponents.

"Of course," Lawrence answered again, holding her warm body close in the moonlight.

Holo's tail wagged beneath her robe.

The world was a stage where all wished to be main characters, but things did not always proceed as they would like. In such a place, becoming the protagonist was no mean feat as even Lawrence knew.

But that changed when someone had put her trust in you.

Holo squirmed out of his arms and stood, and it seemed as if the weight on her chest had been lifted.

Just seeing that, Lawrence had no regrets.

"Come, fill the pitcher and let us return. 'Tis cold." It was surely not his imagination that she seemed to be trying to hide some measure of bashfulness.

Lawrence took the pitcher from Holo with his right hand and filled it with the water he had drawn. Holo held his left hand and giggled ticklishly.

Even if Lawrence was being manipulated by her, there was no question that the matter at hand had some connection to the wolf bones—and to Holo's desire.

The next day in the early afternoon, Lawrence was summoned by Kieman.

As he left the room, it was notable that the most anxious face was Col's.

The Kerube trading house of the Rowen Trade Guild represented the interests of the guild in this important link between the pagan and Church-controlled regions. Many crafty, experienced merchants were employed there as well as the men who oversaw them.

It would have been a mighty feat indeed to outwit them all, and from this point on, Lawrence would take his orders from Kieman and try instead to outwit the northern landlords.

As long as Eve did not betray him, all would be well. Such had been the conclusion of his discussion with Kieman the previous night, Kieman no doubt already having done the necessary background work.

What was being asked of Lawrence was not so difficult a thing. He merely had to maintain the trust of the lone wolf Eve and ensure that things proceeded smoothly.

That was all.

"Do you truly not mind leaving your companion behind?"

"No, it is fine."

The trading house had been busy all morning, so Lawrence had only a few moments to speak with Kieman before setting out. As the master of the branch, Kieman wore fine clothes with a crisply starched collar.

Given that negotiations between the northern landlords and southern merchants were happening on the delta, leaving Holo and Col behind would make it seem as if they had been taken hostage, which might have been why Kieman went to the trouble of asking whether they would go along with Lawrence.

"So then, you have only to explain to Madam Bolan what I told you earlier. My own preparations have become rather complicated, so any independent action on your part could easily create small holes, which will quickly become large problems," said Kieman, looking firmly into Lawrence's eyes.

Lawrence nodded calmly in return. Even if he had been told the complete plan, he was sure he would not have understood it. Even Holo and Col could run circles around him, politically.

Just as Kieman could hardly spend two weeks on rough mountain roads while subsisting on nothing but rye bread and rainwater, Lawrence could not maneuver the way Kieman could.

The more he did as he was told, the safer he would be.

The only decision he would make independently was the very last one, at the moment when events had progressed to such that he could judge for himself whether to cooperate or defect.

Kieman seemed to want to say more, but a knock upon the room's door interrupted him. The merchant delegation had assembled and was ready to depart.

It was time.

"Well, then. I shall be counting on you."

Having fully received Kieman's orders, Lawrence left the room just as others entered. The trading house's dining hall had a tense atmosphere, as if a battle were approaching.

Of course, the troops on this side felt the strange nervousness of imminent victory. They needed no goddess of victory—they had the narwhal.

It was as if they were only discussing whose victory would be greatest.

Early on, it seemed that the guild seizing the northern vessel that had originally caught the narwhal would be the ultimate victor. Even members of the Rowen Trade Guild were whispering that it would be difficult to gain the initiative in the negotiations.

Of course, that was no reason to give up, and the group of scruffy merchants in the corner, who pantomimed rowing or fell fast asleep on the tables, had already gotten an early taste of conflict as part of the southern camp.

Knights and mercenaries were a practical sort and tended not to dwell over shares of riches not yet won. By contrast, merchants loved to count chickens before they hatched, and there was no doubt the previous night had seen many arguments over shares of profits. They were probably ongoing.

Several carriages waited in front of the guild house for Chief Jeeta and Kieman, and a steady stream of raggedly dressed beggars—spies for their merchant masters—constantly filtered between them.

Lawrence remembered the term Eve had used back in Lenos, the town of lumber and fur.

A trade war.

The fact that the atmosphere made Lawrence's heart beat faster was not because he was on the verge of an important negotiation.

It was because he had been born a man, and to a man, this atmosphere was inherently appealing.

"Fellows!"

At this sudden raised voice, all chatter fell silent.

All eyes were now on Chief Jeeta, a thin, balding old man.

Kieman had denounced him as a mere opportunist, but the same could have been said of anyone who tried to avoid calamity.

And while Kieman dressed like a nobleman, Jeeta wore loose robes, which lent him the unmistakable gravity of old age.

He surveyed the assemblage with eyes that seemed able to gaze a century into the future.

"In the name of our patron, Saint Lambardos, may our guild be triumphant!"

"To triumph!"

Cheered on by the merchants, Jeeta and his escorts left the guild house. Kieman never once glanced at Lawrence, exchanging words with others before boarding the carriage that was departing the guild house.

At this sight, Lawrence felt his hand spontaneously rise to his chest—how strange it was that with such a spectacle before him, he was a crucial part of a plan that would reverse the situation entirely.

If Holo had been next to him, she surely would have mocked this sudden swell of a traveling merchant's courage. She would have laughed even—he was certainly laughing at himself.

River crossings were no longer banned, so following the guild chief's procession came merchants, some of whom were merely watching the proceedings and others who, like Lawrence, had tasks to perform.

Lawrence mingled toward the rear of the group and made for the Roam River.

Amid all the people emerging from the guild houses and trading companies lined along it, the avenue took on a peculiar atmosphere. Business was being conducted as usual, and it was hardly the case that everyone in town was a merchant.

Yet the flow of merchants heading north called to mind the northern campaigns. The church bell rang, its strangely urgent sound echoing.

The ferrymen were treating their passengers with a strange

deference, totally unlike their usual rudeness. The riverbanks were lined with onlookers alongside soldiers armed with pikes and axes to ensure that nothing happened.

A particularly weakhearted merchant found himself overwhelmed by the spectacle, and his knees started knocking when a faintly rocking boat heaved him up onto the pier.

But nobody laughed at him. All were silent as they converged on the delta.

It was not Lawrence's imagination that those unrelated to trade were watching as if witnessing something very strange unfolding. In older days, disputes over land were resolved by the sword and were easy to understand. But now they were fought with parchment and ink, so it was no wonder that to outsiders it seemed like so much sorcery.

Lawrence himself had the same impression.

The way that money appeared after a negotiation was not unlike a sorcerer summoning a demon with a magic circle. No wonder the Church was so strict with merchants and their relentless quest for money—the entire business seemed as though it had to be aided by some sort of devil.

Without anyone particular in the lead, the crowd simply flowed. They made their way to the spring of gold, where the costliest items on the delta changed hands. On the tables there were parchments describing an item so valuable it couldn't be traded for coin. And perhaps not for influence, prestige, or pride.

Those like Lawrence—small-fry merchants—found themselves stopped in their path, with only higher-status, wealthier merchants allowed to proceed. Groups similarly arriving from the north were seated. The men of both groups seemed well accustomed to giving orders with mere motions of their chins, as though this were some meeting of ancient wise men.

But here and now, it was the southerners who clearly held the

upper hand. Their clothing, their retainers, and their bearing all spoke of wealth and power. By contrast, all the northerners had was their dignity. And even that was shaky, supported only by their shouting.

The southerners' seats were all assigned, and Chief Jeeta sat three seats to the right of the finely dressed old man in the center.

No doubt the seating order was determined by the profit-sharing arrangement. The northerners had to be aware of that, and Lawrence wondered how it felt to sit in front of men whose purpose was to divide their fortune up among themselves.

But given this situation, it wasn't obvious what the Rowen Trade Guild's profits would be. All Lawrence could tell was that at this rate, the rewards would go to Jeeta, and those below him would receive comparatively little. Lawrence imagined the profits bypassing the guilds entirely and being instead divided evenly, and he couldn't help smiling at the thought.

That was how absurd the idea was.

At length, the northerners had all found their seats at the table. Behind them sat men who were presumably their retainer merchants, who whispered into their masters' ears. This seemed to be a last-minute strategy conference, and their faces were uniformly grave.

Among them, behind the best-dressed man at the northerner's table, was a face Lawrence recognized.

It was none other than Ted Reynolds of the Jean Company.

He wore what everyone else was wearing, what must have been formal attire by the local standards—a tall, thin hat. And had circumstances been different, he would have been the mediator whose goal was to choke off the northerners for good, so seeing the truth here was frightening indeed.

Or if Kieman had called upon Reynolds after all, would he have then betrayed Lawrence? Lawrence didn't know the truth, but

as he gazed at the distant Reynolds, he suddenly got the feeling that Reynolds was looking right back at him. The man was being watched by countless other merchants, though, so it was hard to imagine that he had singled Lawrence out.

Lawrence's feeling that their eyes had met only proved how nervously self-conscious he was.

And he was very nervous indeed.

Eve was nowhere to be seen.

According to Kieman's explanation, she wouldn't be at the center of activity—and that appeared to be so.

Eve's job was to manage the under-the-table dealings.

Perhaps even at this moment she was drowning in love letters from the men desperate to outwit those around them and gain all the profit.

Lawrence, too, had a bouquet to present her, so he turned on his heel and headed away from the crowd.

Not long after, he heard a high voice declare the commencement of negotiations. It was a southern voice that made the declaration, which left no doubt as to the entirely ceremonial nature of the proceedings.

But rituals were used to pray to the gods.

As he thought about what the men at that table might be praying for, Lawrence loosened his collar, terribly afraid.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Just as there are any number of paths to reach the summit of a mountain, there were many ways to contact Eve. Strangely, Lawrence had been directed to meet her at the same plain inn where Holo had brought Col for her drunken ramble.

There were no customers on the ground floor, but the innkeeper seemed mostly unconcerned, as someone from the north had rented out the entire inn. Every inn and tavern on the delta would be like this today.

Lawrence handed over a weathered copper coin with the face of a long-gone king on it, and in return, the innkeeper placed an empty cup on the counter and indicated the inn's staircase. "There you are."

He was being told to take the cup upstairs.

Lawrence did as he was told, climbing the staircase, and at the end of the hallway, he saw the form of a merchant speaking to someone. He would have overlooked the person, but for the fact that no good merchant ever forgets a face.

Despite the fake beard and the cotton he had stuffed his clothes with in order to change his figure, one of the men was clearly one of Eve's lookouts.

Lawrence faced him yet again, which earned him a sharp glare.

"How's business?"

Lawrence stopped for a moment, but overcame his trepidation and walked up to the men, greeting the one he hadn't met before. He realized he was being asked for some sort of password, so he calmly turned his cup upside down. "So bad I can't even drink," he answered.

His interrogator grinned and indicated the door next to him. The nails on his hand were twisted and deformed, probably because he was used to hard physical labor.

Lawrence gave a friendly smile and knocked at the door, entering only when he got a reply. Upon stepping inside, he found the smell of ink was almost overwhelming and mixed with that scent was something more pungent.

It turned out to be the scent coming from an old man in the corner, who was melting candle wax to use for seals.

"Have you any idea how much it saddens me to see you here?"

Physical and mental exhaustion were not the same. Eve's face wore the exhaustion of having read too much, and she smiled, leaning her cheek against her hand, which was propped up by her elbow on a table that overflowed with letters and documents.

"Was it time for your nap?"

"Exactly so. Look how much I've been talking in my sleep."

Lawrence stood in the entrance, yet even there were papers scattered about his feet.

He took a casual look at them—the ones he could easily see included two threats, three unverifiable accusations that such-and-such a person on the north was secretly connected with so-and-so on the south, three invitations of alliance, and one invitation to flee to a foreign country.



Lawrence picked up that last one—it seemed the most amusing—and brought it to Eve.

"Once I was crossing the sea out there, and I happened to be on a ship with a group of pilgrims. We had the rotten luck to be attacked by pirates." Just as Lawrence wondered what Eve's sudden speech had to do with anything, Eve took the letter from him and began to neatly fold it up. "At first the cowering pilgrims prayed to God, but once several sailors were killed and it seemed all hope was lost, what do you think they started doing?"

"I'm sure I don't know," said Lawrence, and Eve continued, amused.

"Those pilgrims finally started just going at it! I watched them do it and thought to myself what strange, powerful creatures humans are."

A poet had once said that fear for one's life was the greatest aphrodisiac.

But a question remained.

"So what did *you* do, Miss Eve?"

Eve tossed the neatly folded letter into the fireplace. "I went through their belongings to collect the money I'd need to buy my own life back." Her dry lips did not move, but her eyes crinkled in a smile.

Lawrence shrugged and produced a piece of parchment from his breast pocket. "I was told to give this to you."

"There's no need for me to see it," said Eve, which made the old man who was stirring the molten wax look up at them.

Eve turned to him and made a gesture with her finger, and the old man turned his attention back to the wax.

It seemed the old man was deaf. Either that or they wanted Lawrence to guess as much and thus feel free to speak.

"All I'm interested in is whether you're my ally or not."

"Or more accurately, whether I'll listen to what you tell me to do in the end or not."

Eve really did smile with her eyes, not her lips. Not replying to Lawrence's statement, she instead held her hand out. Lawrence handed her the parchment, which she read as though it were a letter of no particular consequence.

"Hmm... it's so close to my expectations it's a bit unnerving. Almost as though you told them about our secret meeting."

"You jest," Lawrence answered with his best merchant's smile, and a bored-looking Eve set the parchment down on the table.

"So, he's finally come to the table, has he...?" she murmured, closing her eyes.

At the very least, she seemed to be considering the parchment Lawrence brought her for longer than the other.

"What do you think?" Eve asked, her eyes still closed.

It was still too early to bargain.

"Given that you've received my message, my job's been completed without incident."

"The northern landlords exchange a note of deed transfer of their land for the narwhal. I split the profits with the northern traitor, and your guild gets the profit from having bested their competitors."

"Everybody's satisfied," said Lawrence, which made Eve sigh and rub at the corners of her eyes.

"It's a hard thing, not being able to see the hearts of others with your own eyes."

The only people who could trust in their partners and be sure a trade would go smoothly were those who had never seen betrayal. And those that planned to cheat another—who could also boast that their own trades would go well?

"Do you know who Kieman is connected with?" Eve wasn't testing Lawrence. It was a simple question.

"No."

"Does it seem realistically possible to secretly steal the narwhal?"

"Perhaps by bribing the guards on watch."

"The deed transfer will be written by the landlord's son, who has no actual authority. It may not carry any actual weight. What does Kieman plan to do about that?"

"The third-generation head has already paid his respects to the nearby landlords, and jurisdiction of the town is shared by the council, the Church, and the landlords. So long as they have grounds to assert their rights, things should work out."

"I see. And you believe what Kieman says?" From her sitting position, Eve looked down her nose at Lawrence like a noblewoman regarding a piteous commoner. She spoke as though she was sure that Kieman waited to spring a trap on her.

"I do not believe his words, but I am going along with him."

Eve turned her gaze away from Lawrence. "A perfect answer. But not enough to bridge the distance that separates us."

Did this mean that she could not accept Kieman's proposal? Lawrence hardly believed the entirety of the man's plan, but it didn't seem like such a bad trade for Eve.

Lawrence put a question to her. "What would be the best choice for you, Miss Eve?"

"I told you, didn't I? To betray one and all and take all the profit for myself."

"You couldn't possibly—" Lawrence blurted out in spite of himself.

Eve smiled, amused. She seemed to want him to continue.

"Why would you be so childishly selfish?"

If Eve proposed the same detail to Kieman that he was bringing

her, he was certain to accept on the spot. He would have been delighted.

So why did Eve insist on being so stubbornly persistent? Whatever her reason, it still seemed strange to Lawrence.

Or was it just as simple as that—that she absolutely did not want to share any of her gains? Was it really something so utterly unreasonable as that?

"Childish? That's right, it's childish." Eve laughed and breathed in. When she exhaled, her breath was strong enough to move some of the papers on the surface of her desk. "When a child burns herself in a fireplace, she fears it even when the fire is out."

"...If that were so, then merchants would have no choice but to sit alone in empty rooms, trembling and afraid."

Merchants were burned, deceived—then went out to seek profit again. And wasn't Eve herself the exemplar of that ideal? Wasn't her being the lynchpin of events that would determine who controlled an important port town like Kerube the proof of that?

Lawrence advanced on Eve, half-angry, and found her wary gaze directed right at him.

"I wasn't always a merchant."

"—"

Lawrence flinched at her suddenly meek, pathetic voice.

Eve flashed a quick smile at Lawrence's reaction, then flopped forward onto the table. Paper went flying.

The deaf, old man hurried to his feet, but Eve, still lying on the table, gave him a faint smile. "Don't you think it ridiculous? That by exchanging a few slips of paper and a few of the formless words that come from our mouths, we can gain such money as can buy a human life."

Eve picked up a sheet of paper and dropped it. She then slowly directed her gaze at Lawrence. "Have you ever been betrayed by

someone you completely trusted? Whom can you trust then? The only one I trust is myself when I'm betraying another."

A beast's fangs could be used to attack, but also to defend one's self. So was the reason Eve kept her fangs so sharp because she felt she needed to defend herself that much?

"When your own life was on the line, you asked me, didn't you? What lies at the end of my road of greed? And I answered, didn't I? What I'm looking forward to..." Eve slowly closed her eyes and then slowly opened them. "...Is that someday I'll be satisfied, and I'll be able to reach a world with no worry, and no suffering."

Lawrence took a step back because he was truly frightened.

Aiming for a world without worry and suffering but trying to reach it via constant betrayal—it was like being shown the source of human sin.

This was no act.

It was not a trap.

Eve slowly sat up, reluctantly leaning back in her chair.

"Fine, then. I accept Kieman's proposal. You tell him that for me." She paused for a moment, smiling a snakelike grin. "You tell him."

Eve was a genius.

How could her words be trusted? What was he supposed to report to Kieman?

His gorge rose at the possibilities and doubts, but he swallowed it and slowly straightened himself. She had told him to pass the message along, and he had no choice but to do so.

"...Understood."

He bowed politely, then turned to leave.

For a moment, Eve seemed to Lawrence like the red, many-armed monsters of the deep that occasionally devoured ships and haunted the dreams of sailors.

Eve truly didn't trust anyone. It was hardly surprising then that

she was willing to betray anyone for her own gain. But it was also true that without trusting someone, somewhere, trades could not be completed, and thus no profit could be gained.

So who would she trust in the end? And after all was said and done, who would be betrayed?

When Lawrence put his hand to the door, Eve spoke as though to stop him short. "Hey, why not join me?"

She looked at him expressionlessly. She seemed to be at once sincere and deceptive.

"What, to join you even knowing I'd been fooled?"

"Exactly."

"I don't want to believe I've been fooled," Lawrence answered.

Eve smiled. "I suppose not."

Lawrence had no reply to follow that. If he replied, he'd be taken. Humans were all too easily led astray by the mermaid's song.

He quickly stepped out of the room and down the stairs. The whole way, he felt as though Eve were watching him go.

Kieman was to be contacted via a messenger.

The designated location was a busy little street filled with stalls, two blocks away from the spring of gold. The best place to hide a tree was in a forest, after all.

He sent the note via messenger not just because it was difficult to meet with Kieman in person, but for another reason as well.

Lawrence was under strict orders to tell Eve only those things he had been specifically told to tell her. This was probably to prevent her from using Lawrence to deliver misinformation to Kieman.

Lawrence had to admit that the precaution protected him as well. It was impossible to tell which parts of his recent exchange with Eve had been accurate.

What was the truth and where were the lies? He felt his own trust in people wavering.

"The boss says, 'Understood.'" It was a small, hunchbacked man who delivered Lawrence's message and brought back this reply.

"What should I do?"

"The meeting will be in recess soon. You'll get your instructions after that."

"I understand."

"Right, you'll pick up your next message from us at the prearranged location."

No sooner had the messenger said so than he left—probably to pick up other pieces of information from other places.

They were certainly taking every precaution, but Lawrence still didn't know how effective it would be.

The delta was always full of merchants coming and going, so an unfamiliar face wandering around the town was hardly a strange sight—but everything had its limits.

At this particular moment, a merchant wandering idly around or standing beneath the eaves of a stall, looking to and fro as though waiting for someone, would look extremely suspicious. And suspicion bred more suspicion.

If Holo had been with him he would have been at ease, but having become used to her presence, it was frightening not to have her around. Lawrence grinned in spite of himself and made for the tavern where he had been told to receive his next reply.

"I'm sorry, sir. We've no seats left! Will that be all right?"

There were few taverns on the delta, and most of them had been rented out, so things were especially crowded.

As a result, Lawrence was informed of such before he could enter the place.

He could tell just by looking that the place was packed with people. It was obvious that they would run out of wine if they didn't start diluting it with water, and anticipating that, Lawrence ordered some stronger liquor.

Though he would be reduced to leaning against a wall to drink it, the positioning was just right to give him a good view of the tavern's interior. He hadn't participated in the meeting, but it would be no trouble to learn what happened there, and he wouldn't even have to do anything in particular to do so.

In the time it took him to receive his liquor and take three sips of the stuff—it was just right—he was able to understand the outlines of what had transpired.

The northerners accused the southerners of stealing their ship, but the southerners contended that such had been the wish of the fisherman aboard.

The lines of reasoning were parallel and would of course not lead to any sort of resolution.

According to the loudest merchants in the tavern, odds were that the northerners would withdraw in the night and relinquish their claim on the narwhal in exchange for a share of the profits from its sale. Lawrence agreed with the notion.

Had the southern elders wished to destroy the northerners, they had but to sell the narwhal to one of the landlords and, after grasping military power, threaten all of them into capitulation. Since they hadn't done that, it meant they still hoped for a peaceful resolution. If they hoped to continue to hold the reins of the northerners, they would have to give them a reasonably generous offer, which would leave the northerners satisfied. The landlords' resistance came from their desire to protect their own influence, as well as their simple wish to be able to bargain for some of the profits from the expansion of the delta marketplace.

And even that would not be decided at this meeting, but rather in negotiations behind close doors.

But those negotiations would take place unbeknownst to Lawrence, and the only people who had a full grasp of the situation were the lead characters in the farce.

Because he stood between two people—Kieman and Eve—whose power in the town was uncommonly profound, with the narwhal at the center of events, Lawrence had the false sense that he was somehow crucial to all of this. But in truth he was a mere tributary.

When he considered that his only role was to convey information, he could only smile. And Eve had had him under her thumb all along.

Even the power of liquor wasn't enough to let him calmly consider their last exchange. He felt very keenly how simple it truly was to deal in the exchange of goods for money.

If he'd passed his days in this kind of environment, there was no telling what sort of monster he might have become. When it came to regrets and ambitions, he lived in a different world.

He could only smile at how lucky he was that Holo wasn't here to see him now.

"Sir," a voice called out to Lawrence as he was lost in thought, his cup at his lips.

Any merchant who forgot a face or a voice was a failure. Of course, Kieman's messenger had a rather memorable face.

"You're quite swift."

"Certainly. The boss's work needs quick resolve." The messenger's face wrinkled in a proud smile.

The more information one had, the more accurate one could be, but this required reach. That is what traveling merchants dealt in. By contrast, Kieman dealt with goods that took months

to transport by ship. At distances like that, there was no way of knowing whether the information one had was reliable, and indeed, it was often impossible to have any information at all. In such situations, one still had to make trading decisions regarding goods of incredible value, and to do so, no small amount of decisiveness was necessary.

To say nothing of the fortitude it took to wait out the months it took said goods to arrive.

That was how Kieman possessed the pluck to come up with a plan to trade a narwhal for control of the delta, thereby shifting the balance of power in the town.

And that was why his messenger smiled so proudly.

"So, here." Lawrence found a piece of paper slipped into his hand, as though it had been there all along.

And if Lawrence himself was nearly fooled, there was no chance that any onlookers would have noticed the message change hands.

"Indeed," Lawrence murmured, and the messenger disappeared just as he had arrived.

What he had been given wasn't even in an envelope.

Did they not think he would read it? Or did they not mind?

Either way, Lawrence did not look at the paper. If he had, he might find himself taken in by the information it contained, and thus easier for Eve to trap. Even the sharpest-clawed cat could not find purchase on a smooth stone. The less he knew, the harder it would be for him to be drawn in.

There was a huge difference in the amount of information each of them had, so this was the best way for him to protect himself. He needed to resist acting before things were truly within his grasp and to avoid exposing his true thoughts to anyone.

It was a contradiction in terms, of course—being fully aware

that he was trying to act naturally. But only those who could keep their minds open and their emotions fully under control could truly call themselves merchants.

Lawrence reminded himself of that, as though he were a young boy venturing into a dark forest, telling himself that demons didn't really exist.

Following the same sequence he had performed not long before, Lawrence again delivered the letter to Eve and received her reply. This time she said nothing, only giving Lawrence a look that seemed to invite his pity.

But if he could act normally, Eve could certainly do likewise, so there was no way of knowing how much of her expression was an act. Yet the tired messiness of her hair and the wrinkles here and there on her face were clear enough, and even more papers littered her desk.

When he left the room, the image of Eve dealing with all of those letters alone at her desk somehow stayed on his mind.

Lawrence had Holo.

He had her both as a source of simple support, but also as a trump card—if the situation turned bad, she could wipe the slate clean.

But Eve was alone, and she faced this conflict without anyone she could call an ally. Her situation was unquestionably dangerous, and if it were discovered she was communicating with Kieman, imagining what sort of revenge the northern landlords would exact was deeply worrisome to Lawrence, even though the risk was not his.

He felt his resolve starting to fray.

"What's the matter?" asked Kieman's messenger, when he came to deliver the reply

"It's nothing," said Lawrence, shaking his head, and the messenger asked him no further.

Lawrence melted into the crowd on his way back to Eve's place and realized he was running. Something was making him feel hurried.

He was carrying mere slips of paper, and he reminded himself that nothing further was required of him, but still his anxiety rose.

He could make no excuses.

The messages he was carrying could easily decide the fates of human lives.

"Please wait here." Was it his fourth visit?

When Lawrence arrived to hand over the letter, the guard only confirmed the password and accepted the letter. He did not lead Lawrence inside.

Any torture would lose its efficacy once it was repeated enough, but Lawrence found his worry suddenly worsening.

The guard, of course, explained nothing to Lawrence, and after handing off the letter to Eve in the room, he returned to still silence.

The two guards exchanged no words and did not so much as look at each other. Time crawled by, and the sounds of the commotion outside only served to emphasize the silence in the inn.

It seemed as though Eve's replies were taking longer and longer for her to write, and Lawrence wondered if she found herself having to consider her answers more carefully.

Was she thinking before putting pen to paper? There was no document that would tell her the correct answer and no one around who knew what it was. And yet she had to find a solution to this problem, on which her whole destiny hinged. It was no small feat. Lawrence was reminded of a time when he'd been pursued by thieves in a dark forest and happened upon a fork in the path.

One of the forks would lead deeper into the forest and

eventually to a dead end. There was no time to choose and no one to hear his cries of help, so his only choice was to press on ahead.

The quill in Eve's hand must have felt like it was made of lead.

The door finally opened, and the possibly deaf old man emerged from the room bearing a letter. He looked Lawrence over, then slowly handed it to him.

The letter itself was slightly wrinkled and had drops of sweat here and there on it. Eve's pains were quite obvious.

Lawrence handed the letter off to Kieman's messenger, then received the reply.

"The boss is getting impatient," said the man. "He says the current is growing stronger. And that we must row faster in order to keep up with it."

Eve was surely not the only person that Kieman was dealing with. The current he was talking about surely involved secret dealings with dozens of merchants, with Kieman holding the rudder.

It was a basic principle of commerce that the faster you could deliver information, the better. Perhaps the reason the most recent letters had been unsealed was that they couldn't afford to wait for the wax to set.

Lawrence nodded and ran to Eve.

Yet again, the guard at the door passed only the letter on into the room, and Lawrence was unable to see Eve, which meant he couldn't urge her to hurry.

Although urging her on was no guarantee that she would actually write her response more quickly.

Eve was not stupid; she must have noticed the changes in flow and had to know that regardless of whatever plans she might have, slowness to act would invite only loss.

If the current was fast enough to make Kieman nervous, then

the volume of the letters flowing toward Eve must also have been increasing. No matter how great the potential of Kieman's plan to reverse the situation, Eve was not in an easy enough position that she could just sign on. On the contrary, secret deals had to be carefully hidden in between legitimate ones.

Eve was surely just as desperate as everyone else.

Lawrence reminded himself of that over and over, as he waited in the hallway and pretended to be calm

If it was to their own profit, good merchants would wait two or three days until their scales balanced. But waiting could also mean missed opportunities.

When the old man finally returned with the reply, Lawrence gave a perfunctory thanks and immediately left. He no longer knew whose side he was on. Was he hurrying to help Kieman or to buy just a little bit more time for Eve to think? Or was he simply caught up in the moment? He had no idea.

Kieman's messenger was beginning to look grim, with sweat breaking out on his brow. In the short time it took the messenger to deliver the note to Kieman, Lawrence overheard from passing merchants on the street and in the tavern that there had been progress in the meeting.

It seemed that there would be a conclusion more quickly than anticipated.

The moment consensus was reached, the grand reversal Kieman was planning would turn to so much foam.

And Lawrence doubted that such an opportunity would come again.

The messenger began to use stronger language to speed Lawrence on, and over and over Lawrence prodded Eve's guard.

But Eve's replies continued to take longer to come, and from what he could glimpse of her handwriting, it seemed to be

turning messy, almost drunken. Amid the stomach-churning tension of the exchanges, Lawrence visited the inn over and over again, again, and again.

As he was handing yet another letter to the door guard, he felt a strange unease and froze.

"...?"

The guard looked at him warily.

Lawrence looked at the guard, dumbstruck, but hastily tried to smile.

His heart was hammering in his chest.

It couldn't be.

The words danced madly around in his head.

The guard took the letter into the room with Eve.

"...It can't be," Lawrence whispered to himself.

Why were Eve's replies taking so long? Kieman was participating in the meeting and probably even busier than she was, and yet his decisions and replies came quickly every time.

It certainly wasn't as simple as a difference in their personalities. Eve was the kind of person who could draw a knife on someone without a single hesitation if she needed to. She wasn't the sort of person who would find herself assailed by indecision.

It was when he began to wonder if Eve was somehow even busier than Kieman that Lawrence felt a pang of unease.

When he'd been allowed into Eve's room, there had been letters scattered everywhere. And every time he'd visited since then, there seemed to be more, such that even just reading them all would be quite a chore.

But he had overlooked something important.

Each time he delivered a letter, he had been made to wait outside the room for some period of time.

And during that time, what had he seen?

Had anyone else brought a single letter to the room?

After being made to wait a fair amount of time, Lawrence was finally given his reply. He was able to look around with eyes as clear as the skies after a storm. When the old man opened the door, he caught again a glimpse of the room, scattered with letters as usual.

But then he thought about things.

What need was there to scatter them around like that after reading them? And if there was a reason to do that, what was it?

Lawrence tucked Eve's reply into his breast pocket and hurried out of the inn.

This exchange had had inscrutable aspects right from the start. The oddest was Eve's childish insistence that she simply had to monopolize all the profit. And yet the words he had exchanged with her and the general mood of the place made it seem like it was reasonable to say such a ridiculous thing.

It wasn't as though she had always been a merchant and ready to jump into this world of ready betrayal—Lawrence could imagine the hardships she'd weathered in getting to this place. It would hardly be surprising if she chose to walk the evil path of betrayal if she thought it would lead to her world without suffering.

It wouldn't be surprising, but where was the need? Choosing the path that allowed her to hurt others simply because she was also in pain was a mere excuse.

But what if it really was all an act?

Lawrence's mind raced, and the blood rushed from his head. Sometimes waiting led to greater gain, but sometimes quick action brought the largest profit. And this deal most likely fell into the latter category. Once an agreement was reached at the meeting, Kieman's turnabout plan would no longer be viable.

If Eve wasn't working for her own profit, but instead for someone else's, that would explain why her replies were taking so long.

She was trying to buy time.

In more or less any town, there were men like Kieman, who would always attempt to outwit their rivals given half a chance. How could the elders, who had gained all their experience on that very same road, fail to be reminded of their own youthful days?

Were they using Eve as a tool to thwart Kieman's mad plan?

Letting him waste his time with an idle partner, the elders would skillfully avoid the spearpoint of this unavoidably intergenerational conflict.

It was all starting to make sense.

The letters scattered unnaturally all over the floor.

And the existence of so *many* letters, despite Lawrence never once seeing anyone carrying them.

And Eve never once giving the impression that she would waver in the face of any difficulty.

Lawrence delivered the letter to the messenger. As the man turned to hurry back and finish the delivery, Lawrence grabbed his shoulder and spoke.

"A message for Mr. Kieman."

The messenger frowned, but Lawrence didn't care and continued.

"There is a possibility that the wolf is a decoy."

That much of a hint would be more than enough for a man like Kieman to understand.

It was even possible that Chief Jeeta had set a trap in order to teach the upstart a lesson. After all, given that Kieman had no qualms playing Lawrence as a pawn, it would hardly be surprising if the powers above him would take a similar opportunity to legally crush a troublesome subordinate.

But if it came to that, Lawrence would suffer, too, and whether or not he could borrow Holo's power to escape, his place in the guild would be gone.

The messenger only made a pained face at Lawrence's desperate words and ran off without replying. He had probably been ordered not to accept anything other than letters from Lawrence, in order to prevent Lawrence from making any decisions on his own.

But the situation required immediate action.

If Eve was really trying to trap them, the sooner they retreated the better. As long as this was still the entrance to the trap, they could still escape. But once the door closed, it would be too late.

Lawrence waited anxiously in the tavern.

Since Kieman's replies had been so much quicker than Eve's, this was the first time Lawrence had felt impatient at having to wait for one. And really, it didn't seem as though he had to wait so very long—yet he couldn't help thinking, *Finally!* to himself upon the return of the messenger.

The messenger brought the same thing he had brought before—just a letter.

"Please deliver this."

"—"

Lawrence was stunned into silence, and for a moment he didn't know what to say. "Did you not tell him?" he said, grabbing the man by his shoulders.

The man looked aside, his mouth closed.

He hadn't told him.

But rather than become angry, Lawrence felt only urgency. "I'm not saying this for no reason. And I know why your orders are so strict. But they're not all-knowing gods, and no human can draw a picture of a town they've never been to. They say seeing is believing, and that's the truth. There's still time. You have to tell them—"

"Enough!" said the small man, who was so perfectly suited to his job. His voice was low and thick.

Lawrence released his shoulders in spite of himself. This wasn't the voice of someone who walked the straight and narrow path.

His pronunciation had a whiff of blood and dirt to it.

It was hardly surprising that Kieman would employ a former criminal.

"We just have to do as we're told, you and me."

For the first time, Lawrence understood the meaning of the word *loyalty*—a word that had no place in the world of the traveling merchant.

It was a foolish concept, and there were countless stories where it caused the death of many a knight and mercenary. Merchants were among the few people who were supposed to be able to avoid such problems using logic and reasoning.

Unafraid, Lawrence replied, "Everyone makes mistakes. Sometimes there are things you have to be there to see. It's the duty of the people on the bottom to fix those mistakes, isn't it?"

The messenger frowned at Lawrence's words and looked down. Surely even this loyal man would regret that loyalty if it caused his master's death.

Lawrence had to convince him. He had to.

The moment he found the nerve to continue, the man looked up and pretended to spit. "You forget yourself, merchant. We're just tools. We don't think. Arms and legs don't have their own heads. Do you get that?"

The man's quiet voice was nonetheless rough, the harsh tone of someone well used to threatening others from the shadows. But that wasn't what stole Lawrence's breath.

It was the man's words that stopped Lawrence dead.

"If you understand, then take this letter. I have orders from the boss. And so do you," said the man, slapping Lawrence's

shoulder, then running off as though trying to regain wasted time.

Not a single person nearby betrayed any evidence of having noticed their exchange—the conversation had seemed brief and unimportant, and indeed it *was* unimportant.

Lawrence was Kieman's tool. That much was certain, and as such, thinking about the situation or coming to conclusions was not his duty.

He knew that, and he knew he had to tolerate this until the right chance came. But as a lonely, independent traveling merchant, he had his pride, so such tolerance was terrible to endure.

Though he knew he was insignificant, he couldn't admit to himself he was a mere cog.

Though small, he had his own name, he had his own thoughts, and he was a merchant who could take his own actions. The more he thought about it, the more agonizing it became to deny himself this way.

He knew he was just a small part of a complicated machine. But the reality of that felt like a physical blow to his head. But then, the moment after the flames of rage welled up within his chest and he felt nearly compelled to cry out from it, he suddenly understood—he understood the reason why Eve insisted on acting so childishly selfish, why despite the situation that presented itself to her, she still wanted to keep all the profit.

Eve wasn't trying to buy time, nor was she planning anything.

Lawrence was certain of that.

If this was a trap, he might as well raise his hand and surrender on the spot.

There was no logic to Lawrence's conviction; it was entirely emotional.

When he arrived at Eve's room again, for some reason he

was allowed inside and found himself staring her right in the face.

It was possible to know a person's plans from the actions they took and from the expressions they wore.

Eve had an elbow on her desk and a pleasant, innocent smile on her face.

"You seem pleased," said Lawrence.

But the wolves that lived along the Roam River did not smile with their faces.

Lawrence produced the letter from his breast pocket and spoke. "You truly are planning to keep all the profit from the narwhal, aren't you?"

Eve's smile vanished, and the corners of her eyes narrowed ever so slightly. It seemed like a sort of frown.

But for a wolf who could laugh the whole world off, it was the perfect smile.

Her family had been sold for money, her fate tossed to the winds, and she had to use everything she had just to swim through a sea of sulfur and acid. And all the while she had no doubt been used in other ways, too.

When she was recognized by others, was it because she was the head of the Bolan family, or was it simply because she was a beautiful woman? There was certainly no one who would say her name with any sort of affection or familiarity.

Perhaps that was the real reason why she no longer used the name "Fleur Bolan." If those around her could see her only as a tool to be used, then she would create a mask to protect her true self.

Even if it was a sentimental notion, Lawrence guessed it wasn't far from the truth.

Eve looked over the paper Lawrence gave her and slowly closed her eyes. She then smiled slightly and spoke.

"You're really not cut out to be a merchant."

"And I doubt you're cut out to be a wolf."

The abbreviated conversation seemed like something between a priest and his God.

Eve turned her gaze to the fireplace and narrowed her eyes before continuing. "I had planned to survive, no matter who I had to use to do so, but it seems I won't be able to ignore reality for much longer." She put her finger to the left corner of her mouth, as though she were about to make a joke. "When the trouble in this city first started, the furs I'd put most of my worth into were confiscated. Arold, who'd fled Lenos with me, was arrested. Under circumstances like these, I haven't the courage to be a wolf any longer."

It was clear that the northerners were having a difficult negotiation. When cornered, people would try to shift the threat to those weaker than them. It seemed all too likely, Lawrence thought to himself.

Eve had probably been thus used all along. But this time they were making a mistake, for her forbearance was reaching its limit.

"My name has always been a convenient tool. Only my grandfather and a few eccentrics have ever called me by it. Of them, probably the only one still alive is Arold."

Lawrence couldn't even begin to imagine what it would be like to live one's entire life as a tool, valuable only so long as one was useful. It made him feel as though people were both more complicated than he had guessed, yet also simpler.

With but a few signs, a person who had lived a life he could scarcely imagine would be able to know exactly which hill she had reached.

Lawrence slowly spoke. "So you're saying that you wish to be called by your name?"

The hill was a lonely one and surrounded by enemies.

"...When you put it so plainly, it's embarrassing. No, please don't be angry. I'm happy. I'm pleased we're friendly enough now we don't have to fight with knives and hatchets. I'm surprised myself, truly. I had thought it wouldn't be so very difficult to manipulate you. You're an awfully soft touch, after all. And yet..."

There were many details in Eve's rapid banter that Lawrence didn't want to forgive, but to merchants the tongue could bring both riches and calamity.

If she was being so casually insulting, it had to mean she wasn't speaking as a merchant.

"But I couldn't stand you not knowing. Of course, I won't mind if you don't believe me."

Lawrence didn't know how to answer. It seemed like no matter how he replied, Eve would wind up being hurt.

"When this is all over, I'm leaving this rotten place. So in the end...," she said, smiling an amazing smile.

Lawrence wanted to keep the memory of how beautiful he found this in his heart forever.

"In the end, you're going to make sure they say your name. Is that it?"

Eve's lips curled. Just like a wolf's. Her fangs bared, she smiled a sad smile. "That's right. In the end, I'm going to betray them magnificently, and I shall make them call my name."

Lawrence could only reply in the soft tones of someone seeing a knight off to a battlefield where he would surely die. "Even if they cry out 'Eve Bolan' in rage?"

"Even so." In that moment, Eve's face was back to the woman he knew. "Now then, let me ask this of Kraft Lawrence, who so kindly calls me by name."

Kings speak to only a few chosen people within their palaces,

but not because they have been chosen by God to govern nations with only a few words. It is because they, too, are mere humans and can trust only those close to them.

When she had first met Col, Eve told him that it was a kind of fate to be liked by others. And this was surely what she meant.

"Will you betray them with me?"

Eve had a painful-looking bruise at the corner of her mouth, and in that moment her face was worthy of the wolf.

CHAPTER NINE



Lawrence waited in the tavern after passing Eve's message to Kieman's messenger. The reply was late in coming.

There were fewer merchants in the tavern, and the place was much less lively than it had been. Looking over those who remained, Lawrence reckoned they were all merchants who had been given similar duties to his own, and when he happened to meet their eyes, they would look away uncomfortably.

It was late afternoon, with sunset not far off, but going by the chatter of the already red-faced and drunken merchants, the meeting's conclusion was nearly solidified, the day's negotiations having come to an end.

Evidently the outcome was the most straightforward, boring one possible—the northern landlords would give up on recapturing the narwhal, and the southerners would compensate them with an appropriate amount of money.

Given that the southerners could use their immense wealth to buy out the northern fishermen, thereby gaining possession of the narwhal, the northerners would then have no choice but to compromise.

If they wanted to get it back, their only options were to take

it by force of arms or to purchase it—either of which would be extremely expensive.

If the town was plunged into war, it wouldn't simply be a matter of business; the only ones who stood to gain anything were people in other towns. The people of Kerube would all lose. And they simply didn't have the money to purchase the narwhal outright.

It was easy to feel sympathetic for the northerners, who would be unarmed if the unreasonable happened and fighting actually broke out. But unreasonable situations were like pebbles scattered across the road. If you stumbled and fell on one, hardly anyone would help you back to your feet.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

The messenger finally arrived with the reply as the pungent smells of wine and meat were beginning to seep into Lawrence's body. Lawrence hadn't looked at Eve's last message to Kieman, but he could tell this missive was a significant one.

The reply he'd just been handed was sealed with red wax.

"This is the last one, but you must bring her response."

It would have been easy to assume the small-framed messenger was faint of heart, but in truth he was the kind of man who might well be carrying a poisoned dagger in his breast pocket. Lawrence was well aware that his saying "must" wasn't simply for emphasis.

The seal to the letter was to ensure that Eve need not doubt its contents. Whatever it was, it contained Kieman's final conclusion.

"Understood. I will."

A tool was a tool. There was no need for thought.

The man gave a satisfied nod at Lawrence's reply. Lawrence started walking, and the man watched him go. With this meeting concluded, his job must have been finished.

Or maybe, Lawrence wondered to himself as he headed out again into the ever-crowded streets, looking up at the sky, the only clear thing he could see.

Maybe they doubted him.

For some reason the idea made Lawrence smile.

"Early tomorrow morning, we'll make a show of formally bringing the narwhal out. On the river we'll exchange the narwhal and the ship it's on for the deed of land. After that, get lost. Signed, Lud Kieman."

Lawrence was sure that last sentence was a joke. Once Eve had finished reading the letter aloud, she didn't hesitate to hand it over. It showed just what she had read, with Kieman's signature at the bottom.

If Eve was to take this to a trading house, Kieman's position would quickly become a bad one. That he had seen fit to give her such a document meant that he had decided it was safe to do so.

There was no telling what that meant.

He couldn't possibly have decided to unconditionally trust Eve, so he had to have some sort of contingency ready if she decided to publicly expose him.

"It's a simple, naive exchange. What do you think?"

"If things go poorly, we can always capsize the boat to obscure the truth, so it doesn't seem like such a very bad idea."

The plan didn't differ much from what Holo had proposed to Lawrence, and Eve raised an eyebrow at it. "I see," she murmured, amused. "So perhaps I should write something like this, eh?"

As she spoke, she playfully wrote with her pen upon a sheet of parchment. It was hardly the sort of paper a mere merchant would scribble upon for fun. It was more suited to having the wisdom of God recorded upon it by a grim-faced monk in a stone monastery somewhere, but Eve's handwriting was as beautiful as any monk's.

"Understood. I, Eve Bolan, shall ride upon the boat for the exchange. Aboard your boat shall be the creature of legend, as well as—"

She looked at Lawrence.

"—Kraft Lawrence."

Lawrence didn't respond to this, but Eve did not seem to care.

She smoothly signed the letter and casually tossed it over to the old man who was still stirring the wax. Once sealed and tied with a strand of horsehair, it was ready.

And now Lawrence would have to be on the boat for the exchange.

"I haven't given you my response."

From behind him, on the other side of the door, Lawrence heard the faint sound of the two guards laughing.

He'd heard that they had been spared their death sentences by Eve. Amazingly, she had gained their trust by telling them her plans and convincing them to cooperate. All to get Lawrence to stand here as he was.

Rough looking though they might be, they were no fools.

"Response? You say the strangest things sometimes. Of what value are words to liar merchants like us?" said Eve, amused.

Lawrence could not hide his wry smile. Of course, facial expressions held no great meaning for merchants. He held his smile, making no other movements.

"Trading is a dangerous business. Only God can see the mind of another, but God has no desires. Only humans stained by their greed, trade, and nothing is more dangerous than trusting the greedy. I've written my reply to Kieman, and you'll take it to him. As far as the outcome goes, we might pray or threaten, but all we can do is wait. I've played my whole hand. So all I can do is give you this letter."

Taking the letter from the old man, she immediately thrust it at Lawrence. How easily she turned it over—it was not an overstatement to say the letter would decide her very fate. It seemed less out of courage than a sheer lack of value for her own life.

If things went poorly, her worth would vanish, and anything so worthless was likewise useless.

Lawrence took the letter and remembered the words of a famous, reckless hero.

"Kieman will do as this letter instructs. If he defied it and put an additional person on the boat, then we'd have to add another person to ours, and with each side suspicious of the other, there's no telling how far the arms race would go. So—"

She paused, placed the hand with which she'd given Lawrence the letter on her desk, looked down, and took a deep breath. She had to be nervous.

She continued, stressing her words.

"So when next we meet, it will be upon that lonely river amid the morning mists."

As the wolf of the Roam River, Eve did indeed share some qualities with Holo.

Lawrence took in the sight of her hand on the desk. It was as though she wanted to be held, but couldn't let that show—as though she wanted to trust in others, but couldn't bring herself to.

"May I ask one thing?" Lawrence asked, which made Eve's hand twitch slightly.

"What?"

"I have my companions."

If Lawrence betrayed his guild during the exchange on the river, then he and Eve would have to move the narwhal to another boat, and from there head out to the open ocean. But that would leave Holo and Col on land, which complicated things.

That had to be one of the reasons Kieman had chosen this simple plan. Holo and Col functioned as hostages.

Her expression unchanging, Eve removed her hand from the desk. "Yes, and I have Arold."

The name pierced Lawrence's heart.

"I've given you my reply. Go," Eve finished, looking irritated and waving Lawrence off dismissively.

Lawrence got the feeling that if he contradicted her, she would start yelling.

And I have Arold.

Eve's words were heavy with implication. If they could be trusted, Arold was one of the few things she held dearer than money.

Of course, Lawrence was aware of the power of Holo's true form, so there was nothing to fear. She could certainly keep them safe and save Arold, too

The problem was Eve's readiness to invite danger. She knew nothing of Holo's power.

She trusted Arold enough to bring him along with the fur from Lenos and even pay his travel expenses, but now she was prepared to leave him behind.

Lawrence wanted to imagine that this was because she now trusted him even more than Arold, but he knew how foolish such a notion was.

It made far more sense to assume that Eve was simply prepared to abandon everything for her own profit, as though she had sworn to turn everything she touched into gold.

Unfortunately, as in the old legend, the fool who wished to turn everything into gold was unable to eat, and thus starved to death.

That was what Lawrence found so shocking about her words. He asked himself whether he could so easily toss her aside were she to choose a path from which he could see no salvation.

If she could discard Arold, then she could just as easily kill Lawrence on the boat or betray him again later.

And if he could imagine that she'd be laughing afterward, that would have been one thing. But he didn't think she would laugh.

Do I feel sympathy for her? Lawrence asked himself and could not answer.

Was this just empty speculation? The likelihood was very high.

But there was little in the world that didn't amount to speculation. There were even those who doubted the existence of God.

So what should he do?

How could he grasp his own profit in one hand while holding on to Eve's hand with the other? Lawrence agonized over the question as he gave the letter to the messenger in the tavern.

"... Thanks for all your hard work. The boss'll tell you the rest once you're back at the inn," said the messenger, giving Lawrence a pat on the shoulder before leaving. There hadn't even been time to wonder what sort of misunderstanding might have taken place.

The meeting seemed to have ended without much evidence of trouble, and when Lawrence wandered around the spring of gold, he saw many groups of people conversing excitedly. A bonfire had been lit in anticipation of nightfall, and soldiers stood proudly around the meeting table, trying to look as though they were guarding a holy throne.

Suffice it to say it was a feast of money, power, and honor.

And yet the participants were a small-minded, miserable lot. Perhaps there was a reason why God was said not to care for merchants.

The sky was beginning to redden, and the outlines of crows—or possibly gulls—could be seen in the distance.

Lawrence had thought trading and the earning of money to be a more elegant, noble pursuit.

He watched the lamplights of the town flicker to life one by one as he swayed in the ferry from the delta to the south side of the river.

Eve certainly wouldn't back down now, nor would Kieman

have proposed a careless plan. What his side would fear most would be losing the narwhal in exchange for a fake deed. That would be an even more disastrous outcome than his plan being revealed.

And if Lawrence pulled out, the situation would not be improved. The plan was like kneaded bread that had risen and been put in the oven. All they could do was wait for it to bake.

Lawrence's options were either to pray or to run. There was nothing else. If persuading either Eve or Kieman was impossible, then what could he do to ensure a good outcome?

The ferry reached the docks, and Lawrence blended into the crowd and came ashore. Most of the people were merchants watching the meeting on the delta, and they chattered freely and happily.

Lawrence found it intensely irritating, but he knew the crowd wasn't the real problem.

And yet he felt a nauseous desire to scream and rail, like he had been chasing a cloud he couldn't possibly grasp.

A drunken merchant stumbled into him. Lawrence clenched his fists and was about to fly at the man when something else caught his eye.

"Hey...don'cha go bumpin' inta me...," slurred the drunken man with suspicious eyes, but he was literally out of Lawrence's sight.

Because past him—

Amid the throng of people disembarking from the steady stream of boats that arrived at the docks was a figure he knew well. She faced him, and from under the scarf that was wrapped around her head, she looked at him with eyes he'd never seen before.

"Hey, are you listenin' ta—"

"Excuse me." His gaze never wavering from the figure, Lawrence

pressed a tarnished silver coin into the drunken man's hand, then started walking.

What he didn't understand was why she would be here on the south side of town now that the meeting was over.

And something about the way she was just standing there made her seem cornered.

What had happened? Lawrence wasn't even sure whether to ask, but she settled the question for him.

"Things have gone bad." From beneath the scarf, her husky voice was downright hoarse. "It's too late for me... but I wanted to at least..."

"—"

Eve staggered as though her last strength had given out. Lawrence held her up but then immediately pulled back. This was no joke.

She was eerily light, and her body was hot.

Beneath her scarf, her breathing was shallow and an oily sweat had broken out on her forehead. In her right hand she held tight to a single piece of parchment.

"What *happened*?"

Eve was mostly supported by Lawrence now, and she bit her lip and looked at him desperately.

Whatever had happened, it wasn't good.

He looked at her right hand and the parchment it held. It had to be regarding something important.

"We stick out too much here. We should find an alley somewhere—" Lawrence said to Eve and started to pull her along.

Just then, the church bell rang high and loud, and the people coming and going around the docks all stopped, and each of them looked at the church bell tower, before joining their hands and offering prayers.

Ding-dong. The bell continued to toll as Lawrence helped Eve through the crowds. It must have been God's will.

Coming out of the crowd, it didn't take long for them to find an alley to duck into. The precise moment they stopped, the bell's ringing ended, with naught but its echoes lingering on—as though God's protection over them had ended right then.

"Where are you going?"

It wasn't impossible. This was a crowded port.

The meeting had just ended, and people were leaving the delta.

But it couldn't be a coincidence, given that right next to Kieman was that little messenger. If he had eyes sharp enough to deliver his master's messages no matter how wild the crowds, he could certainly spot Eve.

Before Lawrence's mind could begin to turn, his vision spun.

It wouldn't be possible to escape with Eve.

"Given the state my friend's in, I was taking her to the inn."

"Is that so?" Kieman smiled, as though they really were just making idle chitchat. But the messenger—along with another man who seemed to be a subordinate—took a quiet step forward. "How truly fortunate for us to encounter you here."

Lawrence moved to protect Eve, and the two approaching men shifted.

Being attacked by bandits was hardly uncommon. And both humans and beasts would change their stances just before attacking.

So what should I do? Lawrence asked himself.

It wasn't in his best interest to let Kieman know he'd allied himself with Eve, and in any case Kieman might not have realized that himself yet. In which case, he could bet on that chance and hand her over.

That was certainly possible, but could he really do it? Now that she was sweating and weak and seemed desperate to tell him

something? Could he abandon her, even as she flinched at Kieman's words?"

"No, I—"

"...You do indeed seem to be carrying a letter. May I assume the sender is Ted Reynolds?"

Eve shook her head weakly.

Kieman's tone had changed from that of a merchant to something like a coy nobleman's. But Lawrence's mind was on other matters.

A letter from Reynolds?

"Well, we'll hear all about it. Although we don't have terribly much time." As he spoke, Kieman gave a light wave of his hand, and the two men pulled Eve away from Lawrence with ease.

Lawrence reached out to her without thinking, almost reflexively, but froze when the small messenger pointed a dagger at his side.

"The wolf tried to set us up. Quite thoroughly, I should add." Sometimes a smile revealed anger. When a long-distance merchant like Kieman smiled like that, what would the fate be of those hauled off by his henchmen?

Kieman looked at Eve as she was taken away and spoke as though addressing a worthy adversary. "The possibility had occurred to me, of course, but the method—my goodness."

"You're wrong...I had no intention of selling the narwhal to Reynolds—"

Kidnappers had strange ways of restraining people. Eve was plainly trying to free herself from their grasp, but a passerby would see only a drunkard who needed help to stand. Her mouth was covered, but her eyes flicked to and fro wildly.

Eve was dragged off by the two men, and just before they vanished into the crowds, Kieman spoke to Lawrence. "Mr. Lawrence, if you speak of this to anyone else, you'll regret it."

It was a first-rate joke on Kieman's part, but his next words were terrifyingly cold.

"I'm quite desperate myself, you see."

Then, as though following after Eve, who had melted into the crowds and been washed away, Kieman disappeared into the throng.

Lawrence realized the messenger was no longer holding a knife to his ribs. He had been left alone.

For a while he was unable to move, the afterimage of what he had just witnessed burned into his mind.

From within the horrible writhing organism that was the crowd, a hand had reached out, compelled by a single desperate hope.

And Lawrence had been unable to reach it.

A hundred coins could sink beneath the waves in a single moment.

So in this whirlpool of goods like the narwhal, whose value truly defied imagination, where would one misstep land him? Surely a priest would go pale at the thought of the place.

And Eve had already made a misstep.

After crossing so many dangerous bridges, she had finally lost her footing.

Kieman's words echoed in his ears. "*...If you speak of this to anyone else, you'll regret it. I'm quite desperate myself, you see.*"

Their plan had utterly failed somewhere. Ted Reynolds's name had come up, and Eve said she had no intention of selling him the narwhal.

And then there was Lawrence, left behind untouched. Was that because Kieman had determined he had no information of value? Or because he'd decided that Lawrence was simply being used by Eve? Either way, it seemed that Kieman and the rest really did consider Lawrence to be nothing more than a messenger.



Lawrence sighed, then felt suddenly nauseated. He hurriedly ducked into the alley into which he had tried to bring Eve before emptying the contents of his stomach.

It wasn't the feeling of powerlessness that he couldn't stand—it was this unbelievable sense of self-loathing.

Lawrence had been *relieved.*

He had been so relieved that Kieman hadn't taken him away.

He was so sure he could prove his strength to Holo and defeat Kieman, and then after his exchanges with Eve, he had believed there was still a chance to somehow recover the situation.

And now this.

If he'd felt powerless, there would at least have been some chance to recover. Merchants were always chasing what they didn't have, after all.

Lawrence continued to heave long after there was nothing left to come up. Finally he spat.

He'd been able to save Holo and escape many dangerous situations. If that had merely given him a false sense of superiority that would have been one thing, but now that his thin skin was torn away, it revealed his insides to be even more rotten than before.

His vision was blurry, and it wasn't only because of the vomiting.

Eve's actions hadn't made sense.

Reynolds's letter had led to the collapse of their plan, but she'd come to the south side to warn him, regardless of the danger it posed to her.

Which meant Eve hadn't been thinking of him as a mere pawn. Perhaps when she'd asked him to join her in her betrayal, she had been trying to gain something else, something besides the narwhal.

And in spite of all that, he'd been relieved that Eve was the only one taken away.

He was no courageous protagonist. What better proof of that could there possibly be?

"Shit!" Lawrence cursed and slammed his fist into the wall.

If this had been only a question of profit or loss, he could have accepted it or given up on it. But that no longer held true when a person was involved. It was true that the wagon-borne life of a traveling merchant had been very lonely, but having to worry only about one's self was worth something, he understood.

The truth was, even traveling merchants could settle down in a town they visited if they really wanted to. The reason he hadn't—the reason he *couldn't*—was because he knew he was a coward and too kind for his own good.

The life of a traveling merchant was one of constant meetings and partings. How could they be satisfied with the goods in front of them when the next town might have better goods?

It was true that he had such thoughts, but it was also true that he'd put quite a sum of money into the high-priced item known as Holo.

But that didn't mean that he cared about nothing as long as Holo was safe.

The traveling merchant's curse was a kind of excuse. One couldn't measure the value of human relationships with money. If everything could be decided with money, then he wouldn't have found himself so torn between Eve and Kieman, because the amount of money involved with the narwhal made his lifetime earnings look piddling by comparison.

Thus by thinking of his relationships with others as being more valuable than money, he could keep them at arms' length, like a precious flower of great price.

But just as his cart could hold only so much, the same was true of his heart. And he knew how much that was.

Lawrence straightened, his fist still against the stone wall, and he looked up at the purple sky, wiping his tears away.

Things were so much simpler when Holo was with him.

New things were always getting in the cart, pushing even precious things aside. That was a perfectly healthy state of affairs for those curious figures called merchants, but without the ironclad will of a monk, normal people could hardly handle it.

And yet now that his cart was so full and he constantly had to be careful not to leave anything important behind, his travels were far more enjoyable than when he'd been a single, lonely merchant. He no longer plied the roads alone, with only the rear end of his horse to stare at.

Lawrence spat the last sour remnants of bile out, then wiped the corners of his mouth.

A traveling merchant always brought his cargo to the next town, though he might have to crawl through the mud to do it.

He wouldn't leave any cargo behind.

"So, then," Lawrence murmured, forcing his frozen mind into motion.

He had to admit that he'd been lucky to see Eve taken before his very eyes. If they were resorting to such violence, then they had to be genuinely cornered and hadn't been able to come up with a subtler, more complicated plot.

Even being unused to making long-term plans, maneuvering people behind the scenes, and avoiding those dangers he could anticipate, Lawrence was quite good at buying and selling goods right in front of him.

There was a chance he could win.

"There has to be," Lawrence murmured to himself.

Something he could see, something visible only to him as an outside observer watching the flow of goods in the marketplace.

And he wasn't alone.

Lawrence didn't bother wondering when she had arrived or why she was there. He knew perfectly well that she wouldn't have been able to just sit in the inn, and when one didn't know what was happening, the most basic approach was to go someplace with a lot of people and listen very closely—and for that purpose, the port was the best place.

And his traveling companion had ears of unparalleled sensitivity.

With her wolf ears capable of hearing a pin drop half a world away, she stood a short distance from him, leaning against the wall, her arms folded in displeasure.

She had probably seen everything. And even if she hadn't, it would be easy for her to guess what had happened.

Lawrence gave a pained smile and shrugged, as though acting like his usual self would be some sort of charm.

"Should you need wisdom, I'll lend it," said Holo, her small chin the only thing visible beneath her hood.

"That's fine."

"I do wonder just how many times you'll borrow my wisdom to save another female, though."

Lawrence wondered if she was being so straightforward because there wasn't time for their normal roundabout banter. Or perhaps her patience had simply run out.

He smiled naturally and replied, "Yet you're the only one I travel with."

Holo did not answer, but with a little hop pushed herself away from the wall, cracking her neck audibly. It was clear that she was tired of these ticklish conversations as well, though if he were to say so she would probably bite his head clean off.

"I sent Col to follow them."

"What did you find out at the port?"

"I know not. But before you came ashore, I did see a group of people turning angry. I'd set myself up on the third floor of the baker's shop over there. 'Twas so easy to see, it was to laugh."

Which meant that Kieman and Eve weren't the only group who felt pressed into open action. In a current this strong, Kieman's smuggling ship could be affected as well.

Before being taken away, Eve had said she had no intention of selling the narwhal to Reynolds. That suggested that the letter she held had been an approach from him. If there was more to this than a secret agreement between Eve and Kieman, what would happen if a wider perspective were taken?

Reynolds was on the side of the northern landlords, which meant that there was a limited number of possibilities.

Was Reynolds both openly and secretly trying to buy the narwhal?

"I imagine that's probably because the northerners are trying to find a way to buy the narwhal."

"Hmm..."

"But if that were all, Kieman would have panicked, and Eve wouldn't have taken the risk of coming to see me. Something totally outside of their expectations must have happened to cause this."

Holo took Lawrence's hand and began to walk. "'Tis a shabby town, this is. It doesn't seem to have much coin."

"That's right. And Reynolds is supposed to be at the center of this."

Reynolds might be able to use box-packing tricks to make a little money, but it wouldn't get him any great wealth.

"If he doesn't have it, he would have to borrow."

"Exactly. If Reynolds truly intends to buy the narwhal, it means

he's going to have to collect the capital to do so from somewhere. Ah—so that's why Kieman and Eve were so upset."

From under her hood, Holo finally showed her eyes. Lawrence could see the faint remnants left over from her previously furrowed brow. If she had seen the entire sequence of events, from when he arrived on shore to his meeting with Eve, to their encounter with Kieman and what happened after, she had probably been frowning the entire time.

Just as Holo did for Col, Lawrence knew that once this was all over, he would have to do something to erase those creases.

"Money and power are close partners. If the narwhal trade is connected to someone wealthy and powerful, the matter becomes much more complicated. Do you see?"

Through the ages it was ever thus.

Holo sneered, as though warning Lawrence not to test her. "...If the food you ordered never arrives, you have but to demand your money returned."

Her mind was as quick as ever.

Lawrence recalled the sight of Eve being dragged away by force. That had happened because things could no longer be settled by record of profit and loss in a ledger.

"If their meal doesn't arrive, it's their practice to demand compensation in money or blood. Which means...if this speculation is correct, there's only one place Kieman would take Eve."

He would fight power with power.

Reynolds had come to Eve asking to buy the narwhal because he'd suspected the secret agreement she had with Kieman. Which meant there was no telling how much power was poised to strike at Kieman.

When the time came, having one or two thugs around Kieman wasn't going to help him.

Lawrence pulled on Holo's hand and started walking in the

opposite direction. Holo had probably arranged to meet up with Col somewhere, but if Lawrence was right, he knew exactly where that was.

On they went, through the throngs, and before long they arrived.

The number of guards had increased since they'd been there the previous day.

"The church?" Holo murmured, but then her eyes were immediately drawn to something, and there at the end of her gaze was the surprised face of Col.

"Uh, er, why are you here?" Col asked, having covered himself in a ratty coat to pose as a beggar boy.

Lawrence was now sure his guess was right.

"Kieman's in there, eh? Well, if I'm going to save her I'm going to have to get in and speak to him face-to-face. So how do you think we should attack?" said Lawrence.

Holo showed her fangs and smiled.

"What's your business?"

As they walked up the stone steps and arrived at the entrance of the church, two guards crossed their spears to bar the way.

Lawrence had brought Holo and Col (who had changed his clothes) along with him and smiled. "We have business with Lud Kieman of the Rowen Trade Guild."

Those were God's gift, the magic words, but there was no guarantee that the same God still sat on the throne. Unlike the previous day, one of the dour-faced soldiers opened the door and went inside, while the other remained behind, his spear pointed unhesitatingly at Lawrence.

The plan Holo had proposed was simplicity itself, and the only unusual thing about it was that Col, not Holo, would be at Lawrence's side.

"...Inside," said the soldier, who had gone into the church, once he reemerged.

Lawrence smiled at the soldiers when they briefly pulled their spears aside and slipped through the only slightly opened door. Once Col followed him, the door was closed, and they were again greeted with spears.

"..."

Forward, they meant.

Lawrence started walking, and motivated by spearpoint, they continued on through the hall that encircled the sanctuary.

The church's interior was so quiet it was eerie, and he felt like he could hear even the candles' flames. The ceiling was high and the carvings on the wall were intricate, each one beautiful. But each one of them was an otherworldly demon designed to convey the fear and terror of the world, which seemed like some sort of omen.

Midway through the hallway, the soldiers ordered them to stop in front of a door.

It seemed to be a storeroom of some kind, and one of the soldiers knocked on the plain wooden door, which was then quietly opened.

There appeared the face of Kieman's messenger. Looking Lawrence over, he was clearly not pleased.

"I would speak with Mr. Kieman." Lawrence flashed his finest smile.

He was well aware that this would be dismissed as empty merchants' charm, so his goal was to irritate the man. For Holo's simple plan, this was the most effective approach.

"Do you not get that you were deliberately spared?"

Threats were best employed suddenly, like a snake striking from the brush. Lawrence was prepared, his counterattack ready.

"We merchants love to snatch chestnuts from the fire, after all."

The instant Lawrence answered, the man reddened and reached for Lawrence's collar. But Lawrence knew he was coming and was thus unsurprised.

As the man came at him, Lawrence stepped back and took the opportunity to grab his opponent by the collar, hauling him back out of the room. "And do you not understand that I am here *deliberately* to negotiate?"

Lawrence's smile was unmoved. The soldier hastily tried to separate them, but just then another voice echoed out.

"Is there a problem?"

At this Lawrence immediately released the man's collar, and the other man did likewise.

Kieman's calm, elegant voice was irritatingly well suited to the majestic atmosphere of the church. And yet his hair was slightly mussed as he stood in the entrance to the room.

"I'd like to speak with my acquaintance."

"That's very direct of you. Do you think I will allow that?"

Kieman's messenger stood next to him, his dark eyes staring at Lawrence.

Next to Lawrence, Col straightened himself and stood tall. Lawrence didn't know whether that was in response to the messenger's posturing or not, but it gave him a bit of courage nonetheless.

"I don't expect it will be easy, no."

"How about this? I haven't the luxury of wasting time on you. Fortunately, this church has many other rooms." He looked at Lawrence with cold eyes. He had the advantage of numbers.

But that he was resorting to threats proved he was out of room to maneuver.

"Of course you do. But I'm surprised you would assume I came here unprepared."

"Oh?"

"No, perhaps I should put it this way—I truly thought you spared me because it would be too much trouble to bring me in."

Kieman's handsome face wrinkled in a frown.

Lawrence continued rapidly. "Miss Eve tried all sorts of things to bring me over to her side. She even helped me ensure my own safety. For example—" He coughed deliberately. "She sold me several parchments with your signature on them."

Kieman's messenger started to move, but Kieman stopped him. His lips curled into an unpleasant half smile. "I notice your companion isn't that girl."

"She's the quicker one, after all. And even a girl can carry a few papers in her breast pocket."

"..."

If his dealings with Eve were exposed, Kieman would suffer. Regardless of what actions he took, given the volatility of the situation, there was no telling whether they would be effective or not.

He surely didn't want to risk further danger. And what harm could come of letting Lawrence meet with Eve? Little, he would no doubt conclude.

"Understood." At these words, Kieman's messenger looked up at his master's face. "Escort them in."

The faithful messenger chewed his lip in frustration but did as he was told with admirable loyalty. He shot Lawrence a resentful look, but Lawrence knew that it was the masterless stray that was to be feared, not the trained guard dog.

"If you've anything I need, I'll pay you a fair price for it." Kieman was a merchant, after all. Lawrence looked at him over his shoulder and nodded with a smile.

"This way." The messenger led them to a staircase that led

underground from the hallway into what might have been a vault, or perhaps a dungeon from the days when this had been at the front lines of the wars with the pagans.

As they descended the dark, damp stairs, they encountered an iron door. The messenger knocked in a strange rhythm, and the door was unlocked from the inside.

"Don't even consider trying to escape."

"Certainly not," replied Lawrence politely, which made the man grind his teeth.

Lawrence pushed the door open himself and entered the room. Col followed him, and by the time the door closed behind them, Lawrence had a sense of the individuals in and the circumstances of the room.

Lit by flickering candlelight and sitting on a tuft of hay was Eve, like some sort of captured princess. She grinned as though having heard some great joke. After a few moments, she seemed to regain her composure. The huge smile had surely been her own way of hiding her embarrassment.

"I've come to talk with you."

"And what... joke would you care to hear?"

Lawrence turned his dagger over to the guard, who checked to make sure neither he nor Col were carrying any weapons. Meanwhile Lawrence looked openly around the room, which indeed seemed to be a cellar of some kind. There were goods stacked here and there, with the open places in the floor covered by blankets or hay. Both food and water had been left, and Eve's hands weren't bound.

He had prepared himself for worse circumstances, so on that count he was genuinely relieved.

Eve was in fine shape. But whips and clubs weren't the only ways of making someone talk.

"The first thing a merchant does in a new town is gather information."

"Indeed. I'm surprised he let you in... Ah, the boy's with you. I see." Eve had gained enough practical wisdom to guess how Lawrence had gotten in. "Flowers won't be enough of a gift to give that girl now that you've made her wait alone for your return."

"... I got a fist in the face the last time."

"Ha-ha. She's a stout one, it's true."

Such conversation would have made for a lovely idle day had it been taking place under sun-dappled eaves. Unfortunately, there was a guard watching them with a sword at his belt. Outside the door was the messenger, and it was even possible that Kieman himself was listening in.

"Well, I'm just relieved you haven't been reduced to tearing your bread into small pieces to eat it."

"Hmph. Kieman doesn't have the nerve to hurt me. Reynolds is dirt-poor, so he must've found some rich northern backer. And around here, there are only a few rich men. And they've no idea how I'm connected to this. About all they can do is yell at me."

There was no doubt her ire was directed at the sword-armed guard.

But given Eve's style, if he were truly beneath her contempt, she wouldn't even bother insulting him, so she was probably being considerate of him for having brought her food and water.

"I've told all this to Kieman, but Reynolds's letter might as well have pulled the ladder out from under me. If he's trying to use my agreement with Kieman to control me... it's because I'm useful."

Her tone of voice hadn't changed, but the mood had. Lawrence could swear he heard Col gulp.

"So it's true that he has a wealthy, powerful backer?"

"Kieman suspects as much, but look at Reynolds's situation—he's the most successful trader on the north side, and that's all he can manage. It's hard to think of a familiar figure who has such money. Of course, it's possible that Reynolds is using someone's knowledge to make a purchase order without actually having the money."

"What's his goal?"

Eve grinned a toothy grin. "To take money from people like us, who are caught up in a secret narwhal deal."

Lawrence found himself smiling; Eve was the one who'd taught him that there were people in the world who could think of anything.

"By saying, 'If you don't want us interfering in your carefully arranged, once-in-a-lifetime gamble, pay up.'"

"The northerners are fighting a losing battle. It's hardly surprising some of them are starting to suggest they grab what profit can be had. There are probably others who are mad enough to try to convince the people around them of that, and if they push it, it'll work. They'll panic and pay. Of course, we're probably the only ones bold enough to just sell off the narwhal itself."

Since Kieman had access to the church and was at the point where he would even imprison Eve, Lawrence had a sense of just how carefully this too-bold plan had been constructed. The amount of money spent had to be considerable.

If it was all going to go up in smoke, Kieman might as well pay off Reynolds and try to back out of the purchase, rather than lose everything.

"Of course, given that Kieman's holding me here, that means the odds that Reynolds placed a buy order despite not having any money are low. Kieman fears me being taken in by the northerners more than anything else, so him keeping me here means he's decided Reynolds *does* have a powerful backer. And as for me...

that's why I came to see you, since there were too many clues along those lines."

Eve was former nobility from the kingdom of Winfiel, a half-day's journey across the channel. To make a chart of all the powerful figures she had once been connected to, it would turn the parchment black with ink.

Such figures couldn't act without good cause, but once they had such cause, they could accomplish nearly anything. A secret deal for the narwhal would be an easy target.

Moreover, if they made Eve out as the villain, they could boost their profits and kill two birds with one stone. It would no longer be a question of whether she would survive the tumult—she might not even be recognizable as a human by then.

Taking the narwhal and escaping to the south was probably Eve's greatest wish.

"I didn't think it would come to this," said Eve helplessly, resting her elbow on a rolled-up blanket and leaning back. "If you've figured out this much, you should be able to learn the rest by watching the town for a few days. But whether Reynolds has the money or not or has managed to somehow raise it, this will probably be the last time we meet."

Her sudden talkativeness must have been a reaction to the broken tension. But now she was either tired or simply satisfied with her words, as she covered her eyes and yawned.

She still gave off a somehow unflappable, regal aura. The only reason it didn't seem genuinely divine to Lawrence was because of the short statement she uttered next.

"They're all quite skilled here. I'll be happy if I can die without much pain."

Col cried out a bit, and Eve looked up at him with a little smile.

"D-do you mean they'll destroy the evidence?"

"I've got a mouth, after all."

How many people in the world could shrug so casually as they said such things?

Lawrence began to say something, but Eve smiled like a young maiden and continued. "And in the end, you went along with my childish selfishness. Such fun..."

She turned aside, her eyes fixed on some far-off point. Her profile was truly lovely.

"No matter how terrible the feast, if the last dish is tasty, then it wasn't for naught," she said.

Lawrence felt a pang in his heart, but not out of pity for Eve.

That reasoning was precisely why he had decided to continue traveling with Holo. As long as he could keep laughing with her, that was all that mattered.

But if he could ignore everything else, then he wouldn't be standing in this very situation.

"What can I do to save you?" Lawrence asked. The guard standing next to him was shocked, but not as much as Eve herself.

"Is he serious?" said Eve, looking not at Lawrence but at the guard.

"...I've no idea. Unfortunately, I'm no merchant."

If things went poorly, she would lose her head and he would be the one chopping it off, but there they were, talking like old friends.

"But I can say one thing..."

"You don't have to. He already knows," said Eve, interrupting the guard.

The man looked at Eve for a few moments, then did as he was told and kept silent.

Lawrence did indeed know what he was going to say.

Complete despair brought with it a certain calm. But if a single ray of hope pierced that calm, it could bring with it unbearable suffering.

"If there's a chance for my salvation, it can be only this," said

Eve, her expression calm, but not because she had a heart of iron. "That Reynolds has raised the money on his own," she said, closing her eyes. "I'm tired of talking. I haven't slept in two days."

It was said that good news waited while one slept, but when Eve awoke from her deep sleep, she might well be facing the longest sleep of all.

And yet she lay down, as though she truly intended to sleep. She didn't seem to want to talk anymore, and Lawrence had heard enough.

Whether the guard was one of Kieman's men or had been newly hired, he seemed to have a strong sense of professionalism, and with a quick nod, he patted Lawrence down.

As Lawrence was receiving his dagger from the man, Col stared hard at Lawrence, either unable or unwilling to understand the exchange they had just had.

Lawrence put his hand on the boy's head and said nothing.

Then, as they left the room, he turned and left Eve with one final statement.

"Sleep well."

Eve raised her hand casually in response, but the gesture was strangely memorable.

When they emerged from underground, Lawrence and Col met with the messenger's glare. He had probably heard their entire conversation and would report everything to Kieman, but Lawrence doubted any of it would be of any use to him.

Both Eve and Lawrence were merchants, and nothing was less trustworthy than the words of merchants.

Merchants did not need words to convey their true intentions.

"Did you have a worthwhile conversation?" Kieman asked upon their return to his room, where he did not look up from the parchment over which he leaned. His cheek had traces of ink on it.

"Oh, indeed. Miss Eve is quite a conversationalist."

Kieman signed the paper with swiftness that was audible, then passed it off to his underling and turned to the next one. The missives surely ranged from information collection to negotiations, to threats and pleas.

The larger the scale of something, the vaster its power. But that was nothing to the havoc that could be wreaked when it changed direction.

"Will the trade I mediated be canceled?"

Kieman was at the utter limits of his ability as he read letters and prepared their replies, but his activity ceased at Lawrence's question. The question seemed to require him to use his head a bit.

"Suppose you lock a baker away in your own shop, but then you go to his to buy bread. Would you consider that a problem of theology?"

"So long as there are money and goods, you don't need another person there to conduct business."

"That's true, but we must discover whether there is actually bread waiting to bought. We can always let the baker return to his bakery, but by that point there's no way to be sure he doesn't hold a grudge. We heard he'd bought poison from another shop, you see, so in a panic we locked him away, and..."

"And you'll know whether the poison was bought to kill mice or mixed in with the bread only when you actually eat it."

Kieman's hand scratched over the parchment again, and he finally looked up at Lawrence. "Or when the mice die."

He had locked up a dangerous individual in order to keep a difficult situation from getting worse. That was the sort of idea that only Kieman, who controlled so many people, could come up with.

He couldn't try to torture the truth out of Eve, because

depending on the circumstances, injuring her could mean danger for him. But in complicated situations, even Holo would agree that eliminating the source of the problem was the right choice.

"In any case, the wolf seems to like you, so do please mind your own safety. You seem to have taken certain precautions at least." He seemed to be wryly making reference to the threats Lawrence had made in order to see Eve.

He wondered what sort of face Kieman would make if he learned that Holo did not actually have possession of any inconvenient documents. The notion made him smile. "Thank you for your consideration," he answered.

"Now then, if you'll show our guests out," said Kieman to his messenger, ending the conversation and setting his pen into motion once more.

The man bowed politely and took Lawrence and Col back to the front entrance. All entering guests had to visibly leave. If the numbers didn't match up, it meant without question that something strange was happening.

"Remember this, merchant," spat the messenger through the open space in the door once Lawrence had passed through it. Before Lawrence could reply, the door closed with a loud slam.

The two guards each looked furtively at Lawrence out of the corners of their eyes.

Lawrence made a show of straightening his collar. "Thank you for your fine work."

After putting the church behind them, Lawrence and Col did not return to the inn, instead making for a corner on a street in the smithing district, where blacksmiths made daggers and horseshoes. The shop there produced forty or fifty daggers per week, and even in towns some distance away, it was common to see blades with its name upon them.

Lawrence and Col entered the shop without a word. Lawrence was deep in thought, and Col seemed not to want to speak.

For travelers without money, death was unfortunately a common occurrence—from sickness, hunger, age, or even accidental injury. Whatever the reason, it was not rare for them to embark on the final, eternal journey.

And yet Col's hardened face told of his inability to accept that such a journey awaited Eve.

"Does it anger you?" Lawrence asked, which made Col hesitate, then shake his head—but after a few moments, he nodded.

"It's only because of Holo's and my selfishness that you're in this situation. No one will blame you if you leave." Lawrence explained the danger they were inviting.

But this time Col shook his head decisively. "If closing my eyes would make unfair things disappear, I would do that."

He represented a third point of view, different from either Lawrence's or Holo's.

Lawrence nodded and faced forward, and Col did likewise. And yet the boy still seemed to have trouble confronting reality.

"Miss Eve, she... she can still be saved, can't she?"

Many merchants loved to count their chickens before they hatched, but found it still difficult to make hasty promises. "At the very least, that's what I'm hoping and working for."

Lawrence wouldn't be surprised if his words sounded like a dodge, but they contained many shades of meaning.

Eve had said there was only one way for her to survive, and that was for Reynolds to gather sufficient funds to buy the narwhal outright, either for himself or for the northerners.

In that situation alone the deal would collapse into a simple exchange of goods, and like a burglar frightened into sudden silence by a sound, Kieman would gradually begin the work of cleaning up afterward.

But that path was not lit by as much as a single lamp, and the way through was cloaked in darkness.

The state of Reynolds's shop was the proof of that, and one didn't have to be from Kerube to guess at the condition of his coin purse.

The odds were one in a thousand. Maybe one in ten thousand.

"So his scheme with the copper coin boxes...it won't be enough?

Col had been the one to discover Reynolds's manipulation of the crates carrying the copper coins shipped down the Roam River. The number he received was different from the number he shipped—he sent out more than he received.

"About all we can imagine there is that he's avoiding paying taxes on the number of boxes he imports. It won't be enough to buy the narwhal."

"..."

Col looked down, as though stewing in a sea of thought.

Lawrence knew that fixating on one thing to the exclusion of all others was a bad habit of his, so when he saw such a perfect example of that very same trait right in front of him, it made it harder to correct.

"It's important to think hard about these things, but..."

"Huh?"

"First we have to protect ourselves. That's the predicament we're in now."

Lawrence nudged Col forward, urging him on, and once Col understood, he started running.

The boy was too honest. If Lawrence had explained everything to him, his trepidation at coming to this place would have been all too obvious.

For a craft district, the streets in the blacksmiths' quarter were quite wide, and being frequently used to transport heavy

materials, their paving was of good quality. In the twisting, crowded streets elsewhere, locals could navigate much more quickly. But on fine pavement and easily traveled streets, it was travelers themselves who were swifter.

Pulling up the hem of his robe, Col ran with admirable quickness.

"Wait! You bastards!"

It was common enough to see a merchant chasing after a thief—but quite rare to see a thug chasing after a merchant.

The smiths making knives, spoons, files and nails, spoons, and bowls looked up from their polishing and hammering in curiosity.

A kidnapping could hardly take place while others watched.

By the time Lawrence and Col dashed out of the smithing district, exhaling white puffs of breath, their pursuers were suddenly nowhere to be seen.

But that didn't mean they had given up. They were surely using their knowledge of the town to circle around and head Lawrence off.

Col looked up at Lawrence like a loyal sheepdog waiting for a command, but of course, he also anticipated what was coming.

"Soon, I'd think."

And just as Lawrence spoke, a short, thin beggar appeared from an alley ahead of them.

"Ah—"

No sooner did Col utter the sound than he and Lawrence ran after the beggar. Saying nothing, the beggar disappeared back into the alley.

Unlike the streets they had just been on, these were complicated and twisty and fairly difficult to navigate for those unfamiliar with them. The beggar made good, easy speed, and Lawrence and Col were pressed just keeping up.

They seemed to follow forever, and just as Lawrence began to break a sweat, the beggar stopped and looked back at them.

"'Tis far enough, aye?" Holo's breath was short, but under the ragged coat she'd borrowed from Col, her face was happy. No doubt such chases got her wolf's blood rushing. "So I take it you were able to see the vixen?"

"She seemed better than I'd guessed."

"My, my. Still—" said Holo, peering at Col, who had taken back his coat and promptly covered his head with it. "When you say she was well, was she like this one here?"

A tangled knot that was impossible to untie could cause problems, and there was no telling what its threads might be connected to. It made sense to simply dispose of it.

Holo pinched Col's right cheek, and he smiled.

"She was tenacious yet somehow upstanding, I'll bet."

"... You don't seem to hate Eve as much as you claim to."

At these words, Holo grinned meaningfully, and she gestured to the north with her chin. "'Twas a riot at the port, as though a bonfire had been kindled."

"Did someone make a move?" It was Col who asked the question, his cheek still midpinch.

Lawrence felt bad for thinking it, but having someone around who was more nervous than he was made him feel calmer. The situation was fluid, and no matter how wary they were, if they simply waited around, their chance to bring about the best outcome would vanish.

But if they saw their chance, they would have to take it. Lawrence nodded, prompting Holo to continue.

"Reynolds seemed so humble the other night, but he's quite the actor. Now he's full of boasting. The oppressed can be strong—they wish to pay back in full those who've made them suffer, after all."

"He was negotiating? With the southerners?"

"He kept railing that he was a customer, demanded to be shown what he was buying. I've no particular hatred for the people of this side, but I had to laugh at their nervousness."

Lawrence and Col shared a look. If Reynolds wanted to see the goods, it was clear where he would go next.

"Ah, I suppose your ears cannot hear them. They're three blocks away from us."

"But does that mean he's actually raised the money to buy it?" asked Lawrence.

Holo tilted her head, and despite what she was doing to him, Col's gaze was far away. Just as his face wrinkled in thought, something occurred to Lawrence.

"D-does he have the money?" Col was the first to speak up.

In the dark alley, Holo's ears swiveled as she answered. "'Twas a war of words. He demanded to see the goods, while they demanded to see the money. They were out of their seats in anger, and this Reynolds fellow matched them every time."

"Mr. Lawrence—"

"Yes, but... why? What could this mean?"

Holo's shoulders shook with laughter. She'd abandoned thinking about it anymore, seemingly saying that it was a man's duty to save a captured woman.

"It would be strange for him to have the coin. No matter how quickly he's been able to rally support, it still takes time to turn that into cash. So has he had it hidden away all this time?"

If so, there was no reason to wait until things had gotten so out of hand. As it was there was enough risk of someone like Kieman taking some kind of irreparable independent action.

And then there was an issue Lawrence had long considered ever since they had started chasing the wolf bones—moving

a large amount of cash was like moving a giant. Someone was always sure to notice.

So how could he have collected enough money to buy the narwhal without anyone realizing it?

Lawrence was well aware of how clever town merchants could be. They watched over the ports, always careful to note who was dealing in how much goods. Goods were physical things, and physical things could be observed. Which meant that if Kieman determined that Reynolds didn't have the money that had to be the truth.

"I know not how. But 'twill be simple enough to discover the truth." Holo stretched and took a deep breath.

Her eyes narrowed, and she looked off into the distance as though she were reminiscing, although Lawrence was sure Reynolds was in that same direction.

"We know their move. They will go to the church."

"Why? How does he have the money? Whose *is* it?"

Kieman was at the church; so was Eve.

What sort of farce would happen when Reynolds's party arrived in force, dragging crates of money with them?

Money was money, no matter what—so the saying went—but that simply wasn't true. What kind of money it was, whose it was, its provenance—these things were all of deep importance.

Kieman and the others had to be terrified.

Already busy with destroying evidence, now their subordinates were probably fleeing with important documents like rats from a sinking ship. And when it came out that Eve was being held in the church cellar, who would be in the worst position?

Naturally that would be Kieman and Kieman's superior, Chief Jeeta.

It was impossible for Reynolds not to have realized the secret

deal between Eve and Kieman. And as the backbone of the northern landlords' support, he would have learned of Eve's sudden disappearance. A bit of thought would make her location clear, at which point all he had to decide was what sort of hole to drop them all in.

Being completely on the defensive, Kieman and the rest could do nothing but run. Lawrence wondered if he had already dragged Eve out of the cellar and begun running her through the alleyways.

But Kieman wasn't the only one with spies and lookouts all over the town. And how many of those were foolish enough to overlook important figures like Kieman and Eve if they were exposed? If they were discovered escaping, excuses would be less and less effective.

This was what it meant to have one's back against the wall.

"Mr. Lawrence, at this rate, Miss Eve will—" Col cried, grabbing Lawrence's shoulder.

Kieman and his comrades were out of time. They had no way to discover whose money it was that Reynolds held. So what action could he take in order to protect himself?

The answer was simple. He'd surround himself with only those who would agree on a story with him.

There was no chance Eve would be among that group.

"I see three paths."

The transformed wolf who dwelled within wheat yet refused to be called a god narrowed her eyes at the pinprick of torchlight that lit the end of the alleyway.

"One, you can give up. Two, ask me for help. Three—"

"—Go see for ourselves."

Holo smiled an unfriendly smile. "Go... and do what?"

"Things will work out one way or another. When you're cornered, nothing's more powerful than a little misdirection. With

no way to be sure of the truth one way or another, whoever makes the most irrefutable argument wins."

"If you can convince Kieman, the vixen may yet be saved."

Col's eyes flicked unblinkingly back and forth between Holo and Lawrence, as though he were being forced to watch a drama he didn't want to see.

"So are you sure?"

Lawrence couldn't look Col in the eyes. Growing up meant learning how to deceive one's own self above all others.

"Even if not, we have to move," said Lawrence.

"But that's—"

"Not every problem has a satisfactory solution."

At Holo's words, Col's eyes filled up with tears. "But, but then, Miss Holo, you could—"

"If you were to break into someplace with so many people, could you make sure that they were all unharmed?" Lawrence asked Holo, carefully lowering his voice.

At his question, she scratched her cheek and cocked her head. "If the building does not collapse once I smash through the stained glass, aye. Else..."

Lawrence recalled the church's great bell tower. Anything so tall, be they toy blocks or brick, sacrificed stability for height. If the building fell, even Holo might not escape safely, and many people would surely be trapped in the rubble.

That said, attacking the front entrance of the church would put them in front of countless spears.

Holo was not a god.

She was not.

"We can still run now, if we wish. There are good and bad in your pack, and not all of them are your enemies, aye?"

Betting on that possibility certainly was an option.

When Kieman's plans became public, he would certainly be

considered the ringleader. Lawrence was merely a poor traveling merchant he'd used. Lawrence surely had comrades who would support him as such.

"..."

Wilting with despair, Col wasn't even bothering to dry his tears.

The boy had journeyed south in an attempt to save his own village. To do that would have taken not just firm resolve and strength, but also greater kindness as well.

Eve had looked at Col as though he shone, and it was that light that caused her to treat him so kindly.

"There are many options we can choose, but only one outcome can result."

"Should we not then decide the outcome we want and make our choices thereby?"

Travelers sometimes had to leave behind belongings and opportunities and even friends or injured people they encountered by the roadside. Sometimes they pulled at one's hair or clung to one's clothes.

So what of Eve?

Lawrence thought back to her strange honesty—she had said she was tired and slept, lying down right there on the spot.

He could guess at what would happen.

There were always infinite choices, but there could only ever be a single result. Dramatic turnarounds were uncommon, because the natural progression of events was a difficult force to resist.

"If Reynolds were handling shipments of gold coins..."

"Hmm?"

"...Using the method Col discovered, he could've put aside quite a lot of capital."

Lawrence had once been attacked by a pack of wolves on a snowy mountain. He and his party had had to leave a friend with a broken leg behind and escape into a woodcutter's cabin. Unable

to stay quiet, they had chattered the night away, faces flushed as though they'd been drinking, yet there was no wine.

"Taxes are no more than twenty or thirty percent of the value of the goods. Still, twenty percent of a crate of gold coins is a huge amount of money. Of course, the coin counts are much stricter for gold, so he couldn't have used the same method, I don't think."

Lawrence held Col's shoulders, and with his eyes gestured for Holo to start walking. If they were going to flee, they would need to take advantage of the chaos.

"Hmm. The scheme Col noticed—'twould work better the other way, I should think."

"The other way?" Lawrence asked.

Holo stepped over a stick that was leaning against a wall. "Aye," she answered. "He brings in sixty crates, then sends along fifty-eight. If he keeps two full crates of copper coins, that's quite a bit of profit, is it not?"

"Yes, true. Or he could receive sixty and send sixty along."

"But that would just amount to breaking even, would it not?"

"Oh? The crates he'd send along would simply contain fewer coins than the ones he receives down the river, and he'd pocket the difference. At that rate I'll bet he could put aside a bit more than two crates' worth every time. Of course, in doing so the Debau Company would take a loss."

So how would that work? Lawrence wondered to himself.

"Huh?" Col said hastily, looking up at them.

The only reason Lawrence was not surprised by this was because he was too preoccupied with the hole he had just discovered in his reasoning.

"I just said something odd, didn't I?"

Holo looked back and forth between Col and Lawrence quizzically.

Lawrence thought back to his own words. Frantically.

Reynolds's copper coin–importing scheme would yield only a small profit. To make a large profit, he would have to hit either the Debau Company or the Winfiel kingdom with a significant loss.

"The absolute number of copper coins won't change. What changes is the number of crates, the tax, and...and?" The last word stuck in Lawrence's throat out of sheer frustration as he knew he was missing something obvious.

Col was almost gagging, as though he had a fish bone caught in his throat. By the time Lawrence realized it was Col's sheer nervousness that was stopping him from speaking, the answer exploded into his head with a flash.

"The payment! If he can't reverse the money he's trading, he just does it with the payment itself! The Debau Company wouldn't be troubled at all! Because—"

"—If the accounts all balance in the end, there's no problem. No problem at all! I wonder what instructions have come down-river to Reynolds? That would explain why he could have a huge amount of cash somewhere yet hesitate to use it! That's it!"

Everything he had seen and heard in Kerube finally connected as though by a single thread. It explained how Reynolds had been able to prepare enough money to buy the narwhal as well as all the incongruities Lawrence had felt.

The money *was* Reynolds's.

Even if he did have someone backing him, they were far, far away. They wouldn't have a single notion of what was happening in Kerube. By the time word reached them, everything would be over, which was exactly why Reynolds was placing his pawns in the church.

If he could gain just cause, all would be forgiven.

It wasn't amusing, but Lawrence couldn't stop the smile that

spread over his face. He wasn't going to let Reynolds snatch all the profit away before his very eyes.

Everything was within his reach. And the time to grasp it was now!

"Let's go," said Lawrence and started running. "Come, what are you—" He looked over his shoulder and called out.

"I am not going," said Holo, standing and smiling.

"Now of all times? It's fine! I'm not jumping to conclusions—the reasoning is true."

Holo shook her head. "'Tis not what I mean," she said.

"So—" *What?* Lawrence didn't finish his sentence.

"I've no wish to see you parading about in front of other females," said Holo like a bashful maiden, sticking her tongue out as she smiled.

Where had she learned to act like that?

Lawrence could only smile, as she wanted him to.

"I suppose I can't say I'm shocked."

"Mm. You can leave me behind and run off, can't you?"

Lawrence closed his eyes and breathed deeply. Eve's words had been heavy with meaning.

Mere flowers would not be enough of a present for Holo.

"Col."

"Yes! Leave it to me!" Col's tear-streaked smile was genuine. If he had to leave Holo in someone else's care and feel security rather than jealousy, Col was the only person he had.

"Heh. I suppose 'tis not such a poor arrangement." Holo smiled and exhaled a short sigh. "Now then, you should go. They may be strutting around as though 'tis a festival day, but they'll arrive soon."

Understanding her meaning, Lawrence turned on his heel and ran, though he knew it was dangerous to turn his back on someone in an alley. He looked over his shoulder.



There were Holo and Col, waving at him.

A moment's glance was enough. Lawrence ran. He ran to the church.

Emerging from an alleyway in front of the church, Lawrence found it to be oddly busy.

Once the curtain of night fell, ordinary citizens would be in their homes, smacking their lips over dinner. The only ones who knew about what was transpiring here were merchants, compelled by their curiosity to watch, but swirling about at a safe distance away, out of fear of the possible consequences.

Which meant the space in front of the church was clear, as the crowd waited for the arrival of Reynolds and his cohorts.

It was indeed the calm before the storm.

And in that calm, Lawrence walked straight up the open path and made directly for the church.

"..."

At first neither the guards nor the onlookers understood what was happening. They seemed to think he was some sort of formal messenger.

All eyes were on Lawrence, but no one moved, and it was only as he went to enter the church that a single guard finally shouted at him from behind.

But Lawrence did not, of course, stop.

The door was already wide-open in anticipation of Reynolds's arrival, and once within it, he turned immediately right, heading down the hallway.

Farther in he saw what he thought were letters dropped in mid-carry, illuminated by the candles in the walls.

The door to Kieman's room was half-open. Lawrence pushed unhesitatingly past it and went inside, but no one was there.

Suddenly attacked by a wave of vertigo, Lawrence realized how

quickly events were moving. *Please let me be in time*, he cried out in his mind, running to the stairs that led into the cellar.

He saw a faint light from farther down.

Someone had to be there, but the silence worried him. He started descending the stairs, hoping against hope.

Then, perhaps having heard his footsteps, a man emerged and started coming up. His clothes had blood on them, the sight of which made the hairs on Lawrence's body stand up.

"Y-you—"

The man was shorter than Lawrence and the stairs were steep, and Lawrence used both of these to their full advantage. He dug his nails into the man's face, then with a dull thud slammed his head against the wall. The man then slid to the floor.

In his hand was a silver dagger, which Lawrence hadn't noticed before.

Lawrence kept running, pushing the iron cellar door open and bounding in.

At the sight that greeted him, he shouted with all his might. "Please, *stop!*"

All but one flinched in surprise.

Kieman was the first to turn around, then the man who had guarded the room. Eve's head was held fast by the man's thick arms, a blank expression on her face.

Her arms were bound behind her, her legs tied; perhaps they wanted to avoid a struggle. Perhaps they had chosen not to slit her throat because of the bloody mess that would result.

"Please, wait! There's no need for this!"

The guard's eyes went to Kieman, and Lawrence could tell his grip loosened slightly.

Eve wasn't dead yet.

Just as Lawrence came to this realization, Kieman came at him,

his face blank and his hair wild. "Who put you to this?! Who paid you off?! *Tell me, merchant!*"

Kieman's composure was gone, and when he grabbed Lawrence's collar, Lawrence saw that his thumbnail was chewed ragged. But Kieman was not his enemy, not now.

Lawrence lowered his stance and let Kieman's energy take him over, grabbing his waist and flipping him end to end.

Kieman saw the floor and ceiling trade places in an instant. "Guh—" he croaked like a frog, struggling under Lawrence's weight.

"You've got to release Eve! Immediately!" Lawrence said, straddling Kieman and holding a dagger to his throat.

The guard had no grudge with Eve but was probably not unfamiliar with the grisly business at hand. Now Lawrence just had to wait for him to decide what he would do. Lawrence never took his eyes off Kieman for a moment, and eventually the guard decided that a turnaround was impossible.

In the corner of his vision, Lawrence saw the man release Eve, raising both hands lightly.

"Is she breathing?" Lawrence asked.

"She should just be unconscious," came the answer.

It wasn't hard for someone experienced with strangulation to first render an opponent unconscious before taking his or her life. How long the flame of one's life stayed lit was up to the individual.

"Mer...chant...you—" Whether he was finally coming back to reality or the difficulty he was having breathing due to the weight on his back was calming him down, Kieman's voice was strained, and he glared at Lawrence out of the corner of one eye.

"If Eve's alive, I have some welcome news for you."

"What do you mean?" The guard slapped Eve's face, and she immediately uttered a short groan.

She wasn't dead. Lawrence was genuinely surprised at how

relieved he felt to know that someone who had once tried to kill him was still alive.

Kieman seemed to still be suffering, probably because he could hear the sound of a large number of people entering the church. It was only a matter of time before they were found and Eve was brought to Reynolds.

"Mr. Reynolds managed to raise the money on his own."

"That can't be!" Kieman nearly tried to jump to his feet, despite the knife at his throat—that's how shocking the news was.

And yet it was true. It was the only possibility.

"I'm a mere traveling merchant, so I've got my hands full trying to turn my own profit. My interests are opposed to Reynolds's, so I can't let him take everything."

Kieman wore a dubious expression, which wasn't surprising—he didn't understand.

Lawrence turned his gaze away from Kieman and directed it at Eve.

"...What...have you found...?"

It was Eve's hoarse voice that spoke up, as she righted herself with the guard's help. Despite having just been on the verge of death, that was her first question.

"I came here in pursuit of the wolf bones, you see."

And Lawrence told them everything he knew. Both Kieman and Eve were even more capable than Lawrence was at telling lies from truth. And then—

"Please get off me, Mr. Lawrence," said Kieman quietly, looking up at the ceiling.

Eve smiled faintly.

Lawrence did as he was requested, since both of them were merchants of higher status than him.

"Can it be done?" Lawrence sheathed his dagger as Kieman coughed and sat up, tidying his hair and straightening his collar.

"It must be. Of course—" Kieman's gaze fixed upon the person whose life he had very nearly taken, and he continued smoothly. "That is assuming she doesn't betray us."

"Well, there's a chance to make some money."

Eve opened and closed her hand, making a show of rubbing her neck.

"God's face looked sort of like the old man's. I'll have to make sure next time I see him."

"We'll just have to make enough to pay for the trip to heaven."

Once they started moving, they would work quickly. Lawrence knew he could depend on their abilities, since he still remembered how terrified he was when those same abilities were directed at him.

Eve spoke in a reverent voice, befitting someone who had come back to life in a church. "Ah, it's true, we merchants are a mad and sinful lot."

The group that entered the church was a strange one. Reynolds was at its head, followed by a series of retainers that deferentially carried small boxes, which were probably packed with gold coins.

It looked almost like a bride accompanied by her dowry, but what he'd brought into the holy sanctuary were gold coins whose shine defied the glory of God.

From their size, the boxes looked to contain perhaps one hundred coins. And there were fifteen boxes. They had been stacked ostentatiously in front of the narwhal, which in turn was in front of the altar, and before it all stood a proud, boastful Reynolds. He had placed himself where normally only a priest or bishop would stand, and in the pews for the faithful congregation the powerful southerners were assembled.

For merchants as successful as Reynolds, deals valuing thousands



of gold coins were not rare. But when they were conducted by movement of physical coins, that was another matter entirely.

Merchants conducted business with verbal and written contracts because hard coin was as rare and valuable as any treasure. And when a large amount of coin was collected in one place, word would always get out. And when those coins were gold, it would always wind up recorded in the money changers' ledgers. So it was hardly surprising to see so many praying figures in the pews, faintly illuminated by the dim candlelight.

Reynolds's attack had been perfectly executed.

"Come! In answer to your request, I have brought my gold to this holy place! You must fulfill your part of the contract!"

His belly was large, his cheeks jowly. Back in his shabby little trading house, those features had made him seem equally shabby, but now they were signifiers of dignity and power. His voice carried loud and high, like a stage performer giving the performance of his life.

"As the second master of the Jean Company, I have come to record a trade that will go down in our history!"

With a splash the narwhal stirred, perhaps reacting to his voice or the tense air in the sanctuary. And then the room fell quiet, as though water had indeed been spilled upon it.

Lawrence moved away from where he had been watching the proceedings through a cracked door in the hallway and returned to the candlelit room.

Immediately after Reynolds had led his procession to the church, a man claiming to be one of Chief Jeeta's subordinates came for Kieman, but Kieman had sent him off without a moment's hesitation. Whether or not the plan succeeded, he would be held responsible, and if it *did* succeed, Chief Jeeta would have to stay silent.

Of course, Lawrence wasn't a bit worried. Kieman and Eve had prepared a sharp-edged weapon with which to impale Reynolds.

Lawrence wondered if there was a merchant in the world who could face their combined anger and emerge unhurt.

He thought of Reynolds, proudly strutting around the altar, and couldn't help but feel a bit bad for him.

"That's everything I can think of, I believe."

"With taxes, shipping fees, and hush money, I suppose that will about suffice. I've seen the Debau Company, and they should be able to hide something of this scale."

Between Kieman's pen dancing over parchment and tallying figures and Eve's top-to-bottom knowledge of trade routes, it was easy for them to work out the dealings of a single trading company. For a traveling merchant who went about with his cart and horse buying and selling goods as he went, it was a terrifying sight.

"Mr. Lawrence, how's the sanctuary?"

"As we expected. Reynolds is being relentless, but naturally the southerners can't respond immediately. That should give us some time."

Lawrence wasn't participating in the pair's operational planning, instead just reporting his observations. Yet mysteriously, this didn't bother him at all.

"Well, shall we move?" Kieman asked, at which Eve nodded, as did Lawrence.

The plan to monopolize the narwhal was no longer viable, but that didn't mean there still wasn't profit to be had.

Simply put, Reynolds now figured into Eve and Kieman's discussion over how to divide the proceeds from the narwhal. Of course, whether that was voluntary or compulsory was not a matter of debate.

"Here. Your last job." Eve couldn't wait for the ink to dry, so she scattered sand on the parchment before rolling it up and thrusting it at Lawrence. Her joking tone elicited an apologetic smile from Kieman.

Lawrence thought he understood why Eve herself wasn't smiling. As he took the parchment from Eve, he didn't expect her to say it out loud.

"I'd hoped to meet you on the river," she said.

"Better for me to see you off on your travels under the sun. After all, I'm the merchant you cheated."

Eve's eyes narrowed, but she said no more.

For his part, Kieman seemed to have roughly guessed from that exchange how his original plan would have played out. He grinned tiredly and shook his head.

"Now then, if you'll be so kind as to wait here." Lawrence left the pair with those words, and as he exited the room and passed through into the hallway, he got the same old glare from Kieman's messenger, who was posted there.

Evidently the blood on his clothing was from having been kicked in the nose when trying to restrain Eve. Lawrence flashed the man a merchant's smile in spite of himself, probably because he just didn't like the man very much. Satisfied with that, he headed down the corridor.

Here and there were groups of people gathered around the dim candlelight, whispering to one another. Were they even now trying to come up with some sort of scheme, or were they simply conferring on what might happen next?

Either way, Lawrence held in his hand the letter that would overturn the ceremony that was currently taking place in the church's majestic sanctuary. He naturally walked a little taller.

Now he was the protagonist. Armed with that knowledge, he approached the guards posted at the sanctuary door and spoke

with them, then strode inside with his head held high and a serious expression on his face.

A strange murmur ran through the sanctuary, and Reynolds was the only one still wearing a brave, arrogant smile.

"Mr. Reynolds," murmured Lawrence, having made his way through the crowd and now standing in front of the altar.

He was not unknown to the man.

Reynolds faced him and greeted him with exaggerated pleasure, as though meeting an old friend. "Well, well! What have we here?"

It was a fine act. Reynolds was indeed not a merchant to be trifled with.

"Yes, actually, a certain woman asked me to deliver this."

It did not take very much time for Reynolds to understand that this referred to Eve. "Oh ho." For just an instant, a look of revolting avarice flashed across his face; it was well suited to the flickering candlelight. He was surely thinking that joining his capital to hers for the sake of expedience could save him some effort.

"It seems to be a request for trade." Lawrence produced the letter from his breast pocket, which made Reynolds's grin only widen. Given the circumstances, he was obviously thinking he would be able to use her as he liked.

He excitedly opened the letter, like a young lad opening a love note.

Lawrence congratulated himself on not laughing at the face he made next.

"Given that you trade in a large volume of goods, Mr. Reynolds, she requests an inspection of your ledgers. Said inspection will be conducted by a keen-eyed representative of my trade guild."

"...Ah...er..."

"We have evidence regarding your trade in copper coins, showing that you received fifty-eight crates from the Debau

Company but sent sixty to the Winfiel kingdom—though at first we assumed you were merely evading tariffs."

Sweat dripped off Reynolds's face as Lawrence murmured into his ear. It was as though Lawrence's breath was too hot, and Reynolds was a wax figurine.

"But you weren't manipulating tariffs to make a bit of coin on the side. You were cooperating with the Debau Company to shift large amounts of capital downstream."

Depending on the packing method, the number of coins in a crate could differ. Using that little trick, they could transfer the money covertly.

"You received payment for sixty crates from Winfiel, then paid Debau for fifty-eight. So long as you look at each transaction separately, they seem to add up in the ledger. But as to whether the number of coins in the crates matches the amount paid—that's not clear from the books."

Reynolds's face had gone pale, and his eyes flicked back and forth crazily.

"But if we compare imports and exports, it's clear that each time the two-crate difference remains at the Jean Company, doesn't it? And you can use that method for all sorts of things."

That was what Lawrence had said when he'd heard Col's answer to the riddle. The reason he had begun to wonder whether the trick might be seeing more use was because there were so many types of goods where it would apply.

Just as there were too many people in the world for one to believe that one was the protagonist.

"Copper ore, lead, tin, brass, and goods made from them. So long as they have a standard shape and are round, you can do this. The Roef mines are rich with metals, are they not?"

"N-no... but—"

"Are you suggesting that this is simply a secret shift of capital?

I'm afraid that simply isn't so. Shall we send my people to visit the Debau Company? When I first noticed your dishonesty, the first thing I assumed was that you were trying to avoid tariffs. But taxes are important. What would happen if the Debau Company was unwilling to pay theirs?"

Reynolds's face began to twitch and jiggle like a shaking child's.

Two birds, one stone.

That's what nearly anyone would say had they hit upon this plan.

"Your method lets the Debau Company evade taxation, too. Each time they trade copper coin with the Jean Company, they lose two crates of coins from their books. And if there's no profit, they don't have to pay taxes. Now, then—"

Lawrence paused to clear his throat, and Reynolds took the opportunity.

"What do you want? How much? What's your goal? Tell me!" Even caught off guard, Reynolds managed to control himself well enough not to raise his voice.

Lawrence put a hand on his shoulder as though to calm him, smiled, and continued.

"I am a mere messenger. Such negotiations..." He glanced over his shoulder past the crowd in the hallway. "...Will need to be discussed with my associates there."

What was left of Reynolds's pride prevented him from collapsing to his knees on the spot. It would have been one thing if they had been the sort of merchants who could be cajoled or bribed. But the people waiting past the hallway at the entrance for Reynolds were misers who would happily commit murder.

"Now, if you'll excuse me. I'm a mere traveling merchant trying to find some wolf bones, after all," Lawrence said, turning and walking away.

As he passed Kieman and Eve, he briefly shook their hands. The

two of them were quite capable of cooking Reynolds's goose—of that he had no doubt.

He walked along the corridor, passing the grim-faced merchants there.

He wasn't the hero.

He wasn't a great merchant.

He wasn't meant for a grand stage, nor did he have strings he could pull at will.

As he emerged from the church's front door, the sun was completely down, and the torches behind him cast long shadows out into the night.

When he looked back, the grand structure was given a strangely ominous majesty, being lit from below as it was by the torchlight.

He descended the stone steps, passed through the crowd gathered to watch the commotion at the church, and continued on.

It wasn't that he was particularly confident. There was simply a place he had to go. A familiar scene in a familiar building.

He entered through the door he himself had left open, climbing the creaking stairs to the third floor. His eyes hadn't yet adjusted to the darkness, so the hall was a bit dark, but he could tell where the door was.

He stood in front of it and knocked twice, slowly.

A presence on the other side of the door moved, and the door was soon opened.

From the open door leaked candlelight and the smell of food. It had been a dizzying few days. Nonetheless, Lawrence smiled and spoke.

"I'm back."

Holo and Col replied, "Welcome back."

The door gently closed behind him.

FINAL ACT



In the end, they never quite found out what sort of absurd deal Kieman and Eve had forced down Reynolds's throat. But going by the fact that the narwhal trade between Reynolds and the southerners—which had very nearly ended in disaster—wound up concluding smoothly, he must have accepted the involvement of the Rowen Trade Guild.

Reynolds still technically purchased the narwhal, but in exchange for silence about his dishonesty and the Debau Company's tax evasion, the profits would go to the southerners via the Rowen Trade Guild.

Or something roughly along those lines.

In order to quiet the northern landlords, Eve had probably acted as a mediator and directly allotted them a share of the proceeds.

That was what Lawrence could gather from the state of the town, and he had no particular desire to know the whole truth. He'd been excused from acting as Kieman's tool as well as nearly conspiring with Eve, so it was water under the bridge.

And the next day saw them treated to a midday meal that fairly

overflowed from the table. Lawrence didn't even bother to ask who had footed the bill.

"So, where is our next destination?" asked Holo as she devoured a piece of meat so tender it needed neither knife nor tooth to cut it.

The food was so decadent that Col was having difficulty swallowing.

"Good question... Mmm, this is delicious. What meat is this?" Lawrence was completely absorbed in the exquisite meal, and his perfunctory answer earned him a nasty glare from Holo.

"Eve's going to send someone around to tell us what they managed to learn from Reynolds about the wolf bones, so on that count you needn't worry."

"Mm. 'Tis a mere verbal contract," said Holo, devouring a deep-fried fish head.

As one would expect from a coastal port town, there was a bowl full of sea salt on the table, and Holo had sprinkled it liberally on the morsel, and it seemed to be delicious indeed.

She took bite after bite and quickly finished it off.

"You're well aware of how important verbal contracts are, aren't you?"

Holo said nothing in response to Lawrence's question, instead licking her fingers clean like a cat.

"Anyway, my guess is we'll end up crossing the channel..."

"The sea?" Col looked up from his intense deliberations over whether or not to eat the shrimp head in front of him or leave it on his plate.

"They're an island nation that imports foreign currency, so they're full of people who excel at buying all sorts of things."

It wasn't clear whether Col understood, but the moment he

looked back down at the shrimp head, Holo snatched it away and popped it into her mouth.

It crunched audibly as she chewed it.

Col seemed more surprised at Holo's eating of the shrimp than he was at having it stolen from him.

"You can eat shrimp heads. They're rather tasty."

"Wha...?"

Holo would have been pleased if he'd worn an envious expression, but even the wisewolf was weak against such sad faces.

"Hmph," she muttered, pulling back the hand that had been reaching for the rest of his shrimp.

"You two eat nicely," said Lawrence. It was an obvious joke, but he still found himself plucking an herb stem from his face that had been flung there by Holo. "Honestly," he sighed, and just then there was a hesitant knock at the door.

Col started to stand, but Lawrence had been expecting this, so he wound up going to the door.

"It's probably Eve's messenger," he said, opening the door a crack.

Only the shameless or the boastful flung the door wide-open during a meal. When he saw the face of their guest past the cracked door, he was glad he hadn't opened it wide.

"My, perhaps I should've gone in," said Eve mischievously as Lawrence stepped out into the hallway and closed the door behind him.

Holo would still be able to hear them perfectly, but that was better than a fight breaking out.

"You jest. Still, I didn't expect you to come yourself."

"You wound me. I'm not the kind who forgets a debt—and I owe you my life."

She narrowed her eyes beneath her scarf, never truly letting

anyone know whether she was joking or not. And yet if Lawrence were asked if he was unhappy she had come in person, the truth was that he was not.

"So, about what you asked me."

"What news?"

"It turns out Reynolds did have some notion of where the bones went."

Concerned about her choice of words, Lawrence pressed her. "Some notion?"

"I mean, his conclusion was just short of mine." She cocked her head, obviously giving him a hard time.

Eve had the information that Lawrence and Holo most wanted all along.

"Don't be angry. I didn't think things would turn out this way."

"And?"

"Heh. I don't feel like you had such a serious face yesterday." She poked his chin with her finger, which made him scowl. She might have had some wine, to be in such fine spirits. "I'll just say it—it's in the Winfiel kingdom, my homelands, at the Great Blondel Monastery. Do you know it?"

"Blon... Wait, not the golden sheep?"

"Oh ho, so you know the tale. Here on the mainland, only the older generation seems to know of it. But yes, the great monastery with the legend of the golden sheep."

Out on the great plains that stretched as far as one could see, there was a monastery that tended a flock so vast even God couldn't count their number. There was a legend that every few hundred years, there appeared a sheep with golden fleece amid that great flock.

It was the richest monastery in the Winfiel kingdom, its might as formidable as even the greatest trading company.

"Evidently the monastery bought the bones, though who's to say whether that's true."

"No, thank you, truly. I'll be certain to repay—"

Eve's smile cut Lawrence's words right off. "Don't be rude now. The fact is I'm in your debt. I got both Arold and my fur back. I've readied a ship heading south. So you see—" she said, slowly extending her hand.

She looked right at Lawrence, smiling a genuine smile. "I hope you'll forgive me."

Lawrence smiled and looked down to shake her offered hand—that's when it happened.

"...—!"

He couldn't begin to guess at whether he could ever have anticipated such a thing happening. His mind went white with surprise.

"...This scent, is it *abi* leaf? Kieman must've treated you to quite a feast." Eve smiled casually, replacing her scarf as though nothing had happened. "You taught me that business is most profitable when you take your opponent by surprise. That was payment for the lesson."

Lawrence's mind still hadn't caught up as she put her hand on his shoulder and moved closer to his face.

"My name might be of some use in Winfiel. Fleur von Eiterzental Bolan. That's my formal name, but there's another name known only to those close to me. Fleur von Eiterzental Mariel Bolana. I rather like the sound of Mariel," she said, with an innocent smile Lawrence would have liked to see unveiled.

"I hope it's of some use to you, Lawrence."

Her sudden use of his name stunned him for a moment, but he quickly replied, "It will be."

"Kraft Lawrence...I'm glad I met you."

They were her words as a veteran merchant, whose traveling clothes well suited her. Her scarf was wrapped snugly around her head, and she was clad bodily with her thorough preparation.

She took her hands from Lawrence's shoulders, straightened herself, and quietly extended her hand again.

She was such a perfectly fresh traveling merchant it was almost frustrating.

"I'll never forget the name Eve Bolan."

"Heh. Wherever you find money, you'll find me. I'm sure we'll meet again."

She pulled her hand away crisply and turned on her heel, walking off without a single lingering regret.

Lawrence turned back to the door behind him and was about to open it, when his hand stopped.

"Huh? What's wrong?" The door was open, and there stood Col. For some reason he was holding a plate heaped with food and wearing a worried expression. "Um, she told me to go out and see."

Owing to the door's angle, Lawrence couldn't see Holo from where he stood. But from Col's words and his appearance, he could put the pieces together. He patted Col's head.

"Wait here in the hall for a bit," he said.

Lawrence wasn't sure if he had managed to make the right smile, but smile he must, he knew.

Col nodded obediently and went past Lawrence and into the hallway. As he went, Lawrence plucked a morsel off his plate.

It was a bitter-smelling herb, *abi*. The one Eve had named.

The same herb that Holo had tossed at his face.

He popped it into his mouth, entering the room as he chewed it and closing the door behind him.

"I don't want to remember what happened next." If Lawrence had been writing his biography, that's how he would have ended the chapter.

He murmured as much to himself in an effort to escape reality.

AFTERWORD

It has been a while. This is Isuna Hasekura. You now hold the second volume of a two-volume piece.

This one was so hard that it made me nostalgic for the days when I thought I'd be able to finish it quickly for once. Despite thus far being able to finish the development and conclusion of my stories within a single volume, having ended the previous volume on a cliff-hanger, I knew I had to fit the conclusion into this volume, which was why it was so difficult.

Additionally, not knowing how much more material would result from adding a certain number of plot developments made me constantly nervous over whether I was running too long or too short.

It was certainly good experience for me, and I'm relieved to have completed it.

I must naturally apologize for having made you all wait four months. I'll write like crazy from here on out! I'll write, I swear!

Incidentally, as I've blabbed about elsewhere, I moved. For a long time I'd lived in a house that I'd no quarrel with, despite such inconveniences as windows that don't lock and an occasional lack of hot water, and so I'd assumed that I would live in it for a good while yet.

And yet, the day I found I couldn't fit any more books into the bookshelves, I could no longer stand it. From that moment, it was not so very long before I couldn't do a thing about cleaning the rooms. Frightening, indeed.

And so I've moved into a slightly larger place, and life is pleasant.

Space in the room is space in the mind! I don't even get mad when my PC auto updates and restarts in the middle of a game.

The rooms are so pleasant, in fact, that I start wondering if I shouldn't get a cute little aquarium to put somewhere. I feel like I could handle taking care of a little blowfish, say, and for a betta I could just put some water into a jam bottle—and given that I bought a book on tropical fish just a few days before writing this afterword, it may be only a matter of time.

However, living room aside, I'm no nearer to anything remotely approaching a library or study...

But as I hope to have the place tidied up in time for the next move, I've found myself buried in pages, so—I shall see you all again in the next volume!

Isuna Hasekura



The capture of a narwhal and the ensuing power struggle between the northern and southern districts of Kerube has Lawrence caught in the middle! Backed into a corner by his own trade guild, can the merchant find a way to extricate himself from this delicate situation? And what of the wolf bone from Holo's pack? Can the Wisewolf of Yoitsu manage to keep her rage and frustration in check?

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